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Cover: "*I Love My Fschz*" by Simon Dominic

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October 2005

I find that, sometimes, Editor's Notes are hard to write. I shouldn't complain—I only have to write one every three months. Brendon, Jeff, and I (Jeremy) rotate writing them. But sometimes there's just not a whole lot to say. This isn't one of those times. Unfortunately, I have neither the time nor the space on this page to write everything I'd like to write, though if I stick to just Deep Magic stuff, I may make it...

Things just get more and more crazy here at Deep Magic, and I mean that in a good way. The steady flood of submissions continues, our staff keeps growing (say hello to Robyn Hay, our newest staff member!), and our website gets better and better. Steven has been hard at work with some new features, which should be available soon (if not by the time you read this). You'll be able to view our website (including forums) in a new science fiction-themed skin, as well as an updated fantasy skin. It won't cause the earth's rotation to change or anything, but it looks cool!

Our writing challenge contest went well last month. This month, be sure to read the final three entries. The stories are complete, and they await your vote to see who wins the prize. And don't forget the staff entries. There are also three staff-written stories for you to vote on. Of course, we also have the writing challenge entries from August. Hopefully, they'll creep you out just a little bit.

This issue offers an interview that any fan of fantasy should be interested in. Jeff Wheeler got on the phone and spoke with George R. R. Martin. We have printed that interview here. Mr. Martin is one of the best-selling fantasy authors around, so getting an interview for Deep Magic was quite exciting for us.

Simon Dominic provides a fantastic cover this month, with a few additional pieces inside with his interview. Kudos for those who can figure out how to pronounce the name of the creature on the cover. Matthew Armstrong also provides some great artwork inside the 'zine.

We have three stories for our October issue. They're not really scary stories, but they're bizarre enough to fit right in. *The Wood-Witch's Tale* by Jill Elaine Hughes is a unique, not-so-slightly twisted retelling of the *Hansel and Gretel* fairy tale. Trust me, it's like no version you've ever read. Simon Kewin brings us *The Final Machine*, a thought-provoking SciFi story about a machine on the verge of destroying the universe. Not to be outdone in the 'twisted story' arena, Christopher Kastensmidt offers *Daddy's Little Boy*. You've gotta love a tale about a boy who wants to be an assassin, and the parents who help him out.

That should do it. If you haven't yet, stop by the forums, register, and hang out for a while. We enjoy hearing from our readers, and we're getting more and more people coming back every day.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

October 2005 Writing Challenge Entries due Nov 10, 2005

One of the things that has made action movies so successful is....well...action! Imagine the Lord of the Rings movies without Legolas and his bow or Gimli with his axe. Can you imagine Pirates of the Caribbean without clashing rapiers? It could be said that in days of old, certain men were more motivated to draw a weapon to solve problems than to discuss it over coffee. The writing challenge for this month is to thrill our readers with a well crafted fight scene. Do your best to make it real, lively, and exciting. In November, we will give you some special help to try and make it even better. We have asked for advice from some of the best fight-tellers in the business (like Robin Hobb, George R.R. Martin, and Greg Keyes) and will publish their thoughts in our next issue. That will give you time to make edits and improvements before the challenges are due. Keep the carnage down to a minimum please–safe places standards still apply–and keep it under 1000 words.

Selections from the August 2005 Challenge

His Favorite
So Shall Ye Reap
The Woodsman
Uncertain Depths

The above stories were selected from the August challenge, which was to write a scene or short story focusing on horror elements.

Don't forget the September challenge due Oct 10:

Unique and imaginative flora and fauna bring a fantasy world to life. As we continue to blow on the ember of life in Kenatos, we have seen many interesting submissions for the fauna of our fair land. Now it is time to add the plant life and vegetation.

The challenge: write a scene set in Kenatos wherein some form of plant life plays a central role. Be creative and descriptive, but do not exceed 750 words.

The writing challenge contest is down to three stories. See the next page for details and to vote for your favorite.

Final Entries from the Writing Challenge Contest

Well, the votes are in, and the finalists have been selected by you, our readers. Last month, you read the first 1500 words or so from several entries. The second halves of the three stories that received the most votes are included here. Read all three, then click the VOTE HERE text below to vote for your favorite. The winner will receive a $25 prize. And don't forget about the staff contest. The top three staff entries are also below, so be sure to read all three and vote. Bragging rights are on the line!

VOTE HERE!

Contest Entries

Julianna's Awakening
Oren's Blade
To the Shores of Triple, Lee!

Staff Entries

A Bit of Karma
Beneath the Shifting Sands
Long Arm of the Law

All challenges can be found at the end of this issue, but they can be reached by clicking on the titles above. At the end of each entry will be a link back to this page.

His Favourite

By Kim Knox

He stroked back my real hair with tender fingers. I watched the smile curl at the corner of his wide mouth. He always called me his favourite... Again he was pleased with me.

The lids of my eyes rolled forward with a faint click, taking him from my view. The softness of the tissue paper was already enclosing my clean, silken gown... I would always be his favourite.

What had I done to deserve this honoured state? I will tell you, if you don't think it too boastful of me.

I felt the rush of dust-laden air and heard the dying ring of the brass bell. The door to the Shop was slowly closing as Mr. Pitt lifted me gently out of my wooden box and laid me out, with care, on the polished wood of the counter.

My eyes rolled back.

I found myself staring up into the anxious, eager face of a tall, thin man. He squinted at me through thick, dirt-stained glasses, his fingers twitching to prod my joints; rub at the fine silk of my gown; pull at the careful stitching of my scalp.

"Her features are so finely carved." He broke off his scrutiny and glanced up at Mr. Pitt. A smile inched across his narrow mouth. "She looks almost human."

"She is very rare and precious," said Mr. Pitt in his soft, cultured voice. "The most treasured possession in this Shop." His arm swept over the darkened interior. Antique tables and chairs, tallboys, clocks, vases, mechanical toys who trotted through their routine, happily chopping, slicing, stabbing...

"She is beautiful," the man murmured wistfully.

The price was set and he signed the little red book.
I was carefully wrapped and replaced in my long resting box.

Eager fingers tore at the pale tissue when my box was opened again. The man, Edwin Shaw, lifted me up to the stark light, his sharp, green eyes shining. I could see spittle on his lower lip.

"Perfect. Perfect," he murmured.

He twisted me, making me see the polished cases that lined one wall of the dark-wooded study. There was a wide, scrape-scratched table in the far corner, a glaring lamp showing a dismembered creature. Her limbs littered the surface; her glass eyes were staring. Fret and coping saws hung from heavy hooks... Needles. Scalpels. A chisel.

"These are your new friends," he said, pointing a bony finger to the blank, painted faces of the dolls who sat in their individual cells. "This is Charlotte. That one is Emily. She is Victoria..."

I stared into vacant eyes trapped behind glass. My cell was already open. Continuous

searing light; no privacy; none of the cool, dark comfort of my polished, brass-hinged box...

Edwin Shaw sat me behind the glass, staring at me with his yellow-green eyes. Finally, he moved to his bench. I watched him pull on thicker lenses, pushing his eyes wide and round.

The case door was easy to push open, having no lock. Carefully, I slipped out, dropping to the wooden floor on cat-silent feet. Edwin Shaw did not see me. He had eyes only for the soft, waxen head his needles pulled and stitched.

The handle of the chisel was easily within my reach as I silently climbed on to the table. Edwin Shaw's rounded eyes blinked as he watched me glide over the rough surface toward him, silken gown softly rustling in my wake. He tried to back away. He stabbed himself in the thumb. His mouth moved incoherently.

Mr. Pitt has told me that I should make a big hole in the base of the skull. Edwin Shaw had little hair and the bones were helpfully prominent.

The chisel was very sharp.
One. Two. Three. Four.

Edwin Shaw's face lay on the table. I pulled away his eye glasses. Bright green eyes stared at me, calm and peaceful. I smiled and wiped away the redness which dribbled down his cheek.

"That's better," I said.

I climbed back into my wooden box. It would take me home. Mr. Pitt could remove the strange, sticky redness which always coated my silken gown and spattered against my smooth wood. He would brush his thin, pale hand over me, making me shiny and new once again.

I was almost covered in my soft tissue when the brass bell rang out again. My head turned to watch an old woman pick her way through the furniture obscured by the easy darkness of the Shop.

A sharp smile stretched her wrinkled face.

"What a beautiful doll," she said.

I am Lamia. His favourite.

The End

So Shall Ye Reap

By E.J. Hayes

Lucy wakes up, and there's a dead man standing by her bed.

He's thin, and his transparent hands are bitten, scarlet like a dog's half-eaten bone. Lucy always sees them in colour.

"I'm thirsty." He lisps, because his tongue is swollen. His lips are split, his eyes blue and agony-bright.

They're always confused, at first. Lucy cuddles Hubert, in case he's frightened. "You're not thirsty," she announces. "You're in the cellar. Go away."

She climbs out of bed and trails into the dim lounge in her pyjamas, with Hubert's fluffy nose against her cheek.

Mommy is sharp-edged and bony, perched like a wooden puppet on the hard chair. In her hands, a tattered book: tiny print, pages like peeled skin.

Lucy pads over and prods the unresisting shoulder. "It's time."

A shining wet string stretches from Mommy's bottom lip. "As ye sow," she mumbles, and her voice is a brittle scrape.

"He's come out," Lucy persists. "It's time to call Walter."

Mommy's eyes are wild and distant, and she doesn't hear. But Lucy knows what to do.

The kitchen is shambolic, sepia with grime and the smell of Lucy's dinner. Lucy knows about oven fries and eggs on toast and frozen pizza. She knows because Walter showed her.

Walter's number is scribbled on the wall in permanent marker. Lucy climbs up for the handset and presses the buttons.

His voice, distant, flat, always the same: "This is Walter."

"Another one's come out."

A low chuckle. "That's my girl."

"There's no more fries."

"I'll be there soon, princess."

When he hangs up, Lucy and Hubert switch on the TV and wait for cartoons. The ghost wanders, and shouts, but Mommy doesn't see. Mommy never sees them.

Walter arrives. For Lucy, he brings fries and eggs and pizza. He leads Mommy down to the cellar. Lucy yawns, and falls asleep.

When she wakes, it's morning, and the ghost is gone. Walter deals with ghosts.

From the kitchen wafts the smell of Walter's cooking. Mommy sits at the table, her chin nodding. Walter serves her special breakfast, straight from his frying pan onto the cracked plate. Mommy's hand jerks towards the fork, and she begins to eat.

Lucy opens the fridge and pours orange juice into a cup. Walter said never to drink from the carton. In the fridge sits Walter's bag of meat, plump and shiny red. "Can't she have more?" Lucy asks.

"I'm afraid not, princess." Walter grins and takes the last cooked morsel in the pan for himself. "I have other projects. She only gets her fair share."

Lucy remembers the ghost, starved and shiny-skinned. "Wouldn't there be more to go around if they weren't so skinny?"

Walter ruffles her hair. "Why, now, that's an interesting thought."

"If they came out sooner, they'd be fatter," Lucy insists.

"You're a smart girl. Smarter than your mommy, eh?"

He pokes Mommy with his fork, and her mouth drops open. Strings of chewed meat fall from between her lips along with her words: "As ye sow, so shall ye reap. As ye sow, so shall…"

"Enough." Walter forks Mommy again. "She'll never learn. She's got things all backward as usual. If you want to sow, Lucy, what do you have to do first?"

Lucy thinks. "Dig a hole?"

Walter laughs. "Why," he says, "reap, of course. You have to reap. I'll be back soon, princess. Make sure your mother eats up."

While Walter is gone, Lucy thinks it over. If Walter came more often, she decides, Mommy would get more to eat. She writes it on the wall above Walter's number in big, careful letters: REEP, THEN SOE.

Walter returns with another one and leaves it in the cellar.

All day, Mommy sits in the chair, staring while the thing screams. Lucy tugs at her elbow. "Mommy, you have to reap. Walter said. Reap, Mommy. Please." But Mommy's eyes roll, and bubbles pop at the corner of her mouth, and she says nothing.

At night, the screams fade. Lucy picks up Walter's fork, and she and Hubert go down to the cellar.

The thing is sleeping, and she pokes it with the fork. She has to poke it a lot of times, and it yells and thrashes in its chains before it stops moving.

Lucy and Hubert go to the kitchen to call Walter.

"Hello?" Not his voice.

"I want Walter."

"Jesus. It's another one. A kid. Where are you, baby? Are your folks there?"

"I want Walter."

"Walter doesn't live here anymore. This is the police. Tell me where…"

Lucy hangs up, and there is silence.

In the lounge, Mommy twitches in her chair, her head bobbing like a pendulum.

The dead thing's ghost will come out, soon. Without Walter, there's no one to take the blame.

At least this time, Mommy's safe.

Lucy switches on the TV, but there aren't any cartoons. So she goes to bed, with Hubert cuddled in her arms, and waits for the ghost to come for her. She doesn't know what else to do.

By the time the police find her, her little body is riddled with forkholes, and the ghost is gone.

The End

The Woodsman

By David Adams

Bron gripped the handle of the axe tightly, sweat from his palm making the wood shaft slippery. He raised the blade overhead and paused briefly, eyeing his target with careful precision.

Kill…now…

The axe fell sharply, splitting the wood in two even halves, one of them carelessly falling off the stump and onto the dirt. The woodsman shook his head, an attempt to clear it of the voice that intruded suddenly. Again.

He slowly reached down to the remaining piece of wood and turned it slightly, ready to line up the cut. With a wipe of his forehead, Bron turned briefly to the small cabin he had called home for years. Mai was standing on the porch, a large basin in her arms. She leaned over the single rail and turned the basin over, dirty water dumping out onto the red dirt below. She looked at her husband and smiled before returning inside. It was an intimate smile—one reserved for lovers. Bron stared after her, his mind clouding up briefly.

The lecherous smile of a whore…do it now…

The next piece of wood was split before he realized it. The axe rested comfortably at his side, the handle, warm and wet with sweat, a comfort in his hand. He caressed the handle absently. It was a good axe. Much better than the one he broke a month earlier. This one had perfect balance, like it was made for him. He knew it the moment he found it, lying by the side of the road, cast off by someone who no longer needed it. Or perhaps lost by a careless farmer traveling from town. The handle had dings and scratches from years of use, but the head was clean, free from imperfection, save the marks of a blade that needed sharpening. It never lacked for sharpening now.

You must kill her now…free yourself before it is too late…

Bron shook his head again. The voice. He didn't know how long it had been around, but it felt like years. His whole life, perhaps. He could barely remember what the voice said once it finished, but the feeling stayed. Darkness. Something evil was coming, and he had to stop it. How? Something was telling him, urging him to an action that would cleanse the evil and free his soul. Mai…?

Now…

The wood lay scattered in a pile next to the chopping block. The woodsman caressed the shaft of the axe as he started mindlessly for the cabin. The setting sun reflected off a puddle of water. Bron's foot splashed into it, spraying mud onto his pant legs. He stopped and looked down, concern slowly making its way to the surface of his thoughts. He hadn't finished chopping the wood. The axe rested comfortably at his side, forgotten.

No time for the wood. You must kill her now.

Bron's thoughts turned foggy again. He continued to the cabin he had called home for twenty years. In the dense forest, darkness settled quickly. Or perhaps he stood in a stupor for longer than he realized. As his foot stepped onto the creaky first step leading to the door, darkness had settled in.

"Dinner's ready, love!" called Mai from within. Bron heard, but he barely comprehended.

He tried to answer, but his voice was buried deep beneath the dark thoughts now swirling in his head. He continued up the steps, only the slight creak of the boards signaling his ascent. The door was cracked open as the woodsman reached the porch. He lifted the axe, catching the edge of the door with the blade and swinging it open, the rusty hinges squeaking at the effort.

"Hurry and wash up. You must smell like an ox!" Mai teased from the kitchen.

He could smell her from the door. Her fragrance was a sweet intrusion on the scent of the woods. Not even the stew she cooked could wash it away. *The scent of a wolf…she's lied all these years…kill her before she kills you.*

Bron crept slowly across the room to the kitchen. As he reached the doorless entry, he saw his wife, her back to him as she stirred the contents of the stew. Rabbit meat, potatoes, spices. He took in the smell. A part of him knew what was happening, but the warning was suppressed in his mind.

Slowly the axe came up. *Yes…yes…* It was almost eager, the taste of blood soon to come. Bron's lips trembled and sweat trickled down his face, mixing with the red dirt from the day's work. He gripped the handle of the axe firmly, lovingly—his new mistress.

The blade fell, hitting its mark with the precision of a woodsman.

* * *

The man stumbled down the well-traveled road, oblivious to his surroundings. A pack rested carelessly on his back, nearly empty. He held an axe with a long handle in his right hand. The head was stained with the blood of countless prey, save the edges, where a recent sharpening brought forth the gleaming silver of the metal beneath the blood. The wanderer's eyes were vacant, staring blindly ahead. Screams tried desperately to reach the surface of this thoughts, but a black layer of evil kept them all at bay. Tears flowed freely, adding to the stains left on his face from the weeks previous.

From behind, a wagon approached. Without slowing, the man who was once Bron turned to look. An older man sat atop the wagon, guiding the two horses that pulled the cargo. The wagon slowed as it approached the traveler, and the man riding atop lifted his hat in greeting.

"Good evening, sir! You look weary. Can I offer you a ride?"

The woodsman slowed to a stop to consider.

He deceives. He is here to destroy us. Kill him…

The End

Uncertain Depths

By Kristen Noel Walker

"Careful," Ryne cautioned, holding out a muscled arm to keep his two companions from peering over the edge of the boat. "I saw something."

"Where? The water's so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face through it, even if you touched it to your nose." Jade nudged a sullen Pirall, who merely grunted in stiff acknowledgement. "I think Ryne's trying to pull one over on us, what d'you say?"

"I'm not making it up. There's something out there." As if in response to Ryne's words, a black shadow sliced through the water's surface, its outline indistinguishable next to the murky liquid.

Jade let out a fierce yell, which he followed up with a string of stuttered curses as the shadowy figure dipped back out of sight. Even the ever-silent Pirall could not hold back a deep cry of shock at the creature's short performance.

"Why did you insist on this shortcut through the mages' lands? Who knows what that blasted thing is! It looks tainted with some evil, that's for sure." Ryne swore under his breath as he sifted through various articles on the floor of the boat for a pair of oars, yelling at Jade to do the same.

They cut through the water, propelling the boat forward without concern as to what direction they were headed, as long as it was away from the dark water beast. Pirall wordlessly kept watch, his intense gaze scouring the blackness beyond for any hint of a threat.

"It's there!"

Ryne was so caught off guard at hearing even those few words in Pirall's guttural voice that it took him a short moment to comprehend their meaning. He watched the sinister shadow bubble to the water's surface once more, mere feet away from Jade seated at the rear of the boat. Ryne felt paralyzed in horror as he watched Jade lift his oar high above his head and bring it down square on the monster's head, connecting with his target with a dull *smack*. In one fluid motion, the phantom creature grasped hold of the oar in its mouth—if it could be called a mouth—and yanked the wooden paddle, with Jade still attached to the other end, into the dense depths of the water below. Ryne's head filled with Jade's stabbing scream that sliced through the night air and was immediately replaced by a muffled bubbling as he was carried to a certain death.

The paralysis would not leave Ryne's body, and he stared numbly at the circular ripples of water that grew and spread along the surface, framing the spot where Jade had disappeared. Ryne was dimly aware of Pirall leaning over the edge of the boat, pawing through the black water, and he found enough strength to grab Pirall's hands and pull them away from the inky liquid. He was not about to lose both of his best friends.

Ryne did not speak, except to instruct Pirall to grab the extra pair of oars stashed beneath their journey bags and help him row away as quickly as their muscles would push them. Even with the help of Pirall's bulk and strength driving the boat onward, Ryne did not feel they were making significant progress. Time seemed to slow as if stuck in a thick sludge, then race forward at impossible speeds, disorienting Ryne and causing him to rely solely on instinct and the pulsing of adrenaline.

His muscles began to ache, and after a time he realized Pirall was no longer helping him row. He spun around on his bench to see Pirall sitting quite still on the seat furthest away from him, gazing across the water as if transfixed. Ryne was about to yell at his friend for sitting idly when he saw what Pirall was staring at so intently.

Ryne nearly choked as his throat constricted, stealing his breath for a long minute. There, across the water directly above where the shadowy creature had drowned Jade, stood a misty grey form. Its shape was familiar, though he knew it must be a spell cast by the enchanted phantom creature, made to confuse and frighten them. As if there was not already enough fear to drown Ryne without a drop of the surrounding water.

"Jade," Pirall whispered, the low rumble of his voice nearly inaudible. His eyes held a vengeful passion that Ryne had never seen hint of in all the years he had known Pirall.

Ryne looked at the hazy figure again and realized that it was indeed the form of Jade, from the mussed hair to the shabby traveling cloak. Even through the fog that seemed to surround the figure, Ryne could sense something amiss in Jade's eyes. They were pleading, beckoning Ryne toward him, and the longer Ryne stared at the ghost-like shape, the stronger the feeling pulled at him, seeming to untie the threads of reason within his mind.

With great strain, Ryne tore his gaze from the glowing figure across the water, and instantly the pull, the magnetism, left him. He looked back at Pirall and was startled to find his friend standing in the boat, slowly inching toward the edge. Pirall's eyes showed the same strain and powerful pull that Ryne had felt when looking at the figure, though clearly intensified. It was as if Ryne could read straight into Pirall's intentions, and without thought as to what he was doing, Ryne dove along the length of the boat and grabbed onto Pirall's ankle, clutching it with all the remaining strength his muscles would allow.

He was too late. Pirall had already flung himself into the water's obscure blackness, and for Ryne to continue to hold onto him was to invite death. He watched helplessly as Pirall swam with wild passion toward the spirit-like form of Jade and was swallowed by the shadowy monster before he was halfway to his destination.

Ryne's cries permeated the stiff night air as he laid defenseless along the bottom of the shallow boat.

The End

The Wood-Witch's Tale

By Jill Elaine Hughes

When the children first arrived, I took pity on them. But only for a second or two. They were supposed to be my dinner, and I couldn't very well pity something I planned to eat with a side of cranberry sauce and an endive salad, could I?

The girl—the older, more sensible child—was the first one I saw. She looked to be about fourteen or so, and she was sitting under a fir tree, wringing her hands on her dirty smock and yelling something to the boy, who I couldn't see at first. (My eye has been cloudy ever since I came down with that nasty case of toxemia food poisoning a couple seasons back when the plague was particularly rampant among the locals. Do yourself a favor and *never* dine on the poor souls carried off by the plague, no matter how young, plump and juicy their little bodies might still be post-mortem.)

The girl called out to her brother again. (She hadn't seen me yet, since I was using my blending spell to match the peppermint pillar.)

"Hansel, what are you doing?" she cried.

I turned my head, and sure enough, the fattest, ugliest boy I had even seen was lapping at my lollipop shutters like a dying dog sucking the last rawhide left in the world. The boy's skin was mottled red and gray and covered in large pimples (or perhaps boils) despite his preadolescent age. I guessed he was eight or nine. His hair was matted and filthy to the point you couldn't discern its natural color. Only the Goddess knew the last time he'd bathed. He reeked of pigs, boy-sweat, and latrines.

I turned my head, and sure enough, the fattest, ugliest boy I had even seen was lapping at my lollipop shutters like a dying dog sucking the last rawhide left in the world.

But he was *fat*. That was all that mattered to me.

The girl was another story. Unlike her fat and filthy brother, the girl was skin and bones, and relatively clean for a motherless, poorly-clad peasant, with a shock of neatly combed red hair that showed no signs of lice or fleas.

The girl was also smart. Almost too smart for my liking.

"That's a witch's house, Hansel," she said, still wringing her bony white hands as she crouched under the fir tree. "Don't lick the shutters unless you want the witch to come out and eat you!"

Blast, I thought. *She's onto me already.* But then again, the girl didn't seem in a hurry to drag her brother away from my house, either.

Hmmmm.

"Oh come on, Gretl," said the boy. "Witches don't have *houses*. Everybody knows they live on *broomsticks*."

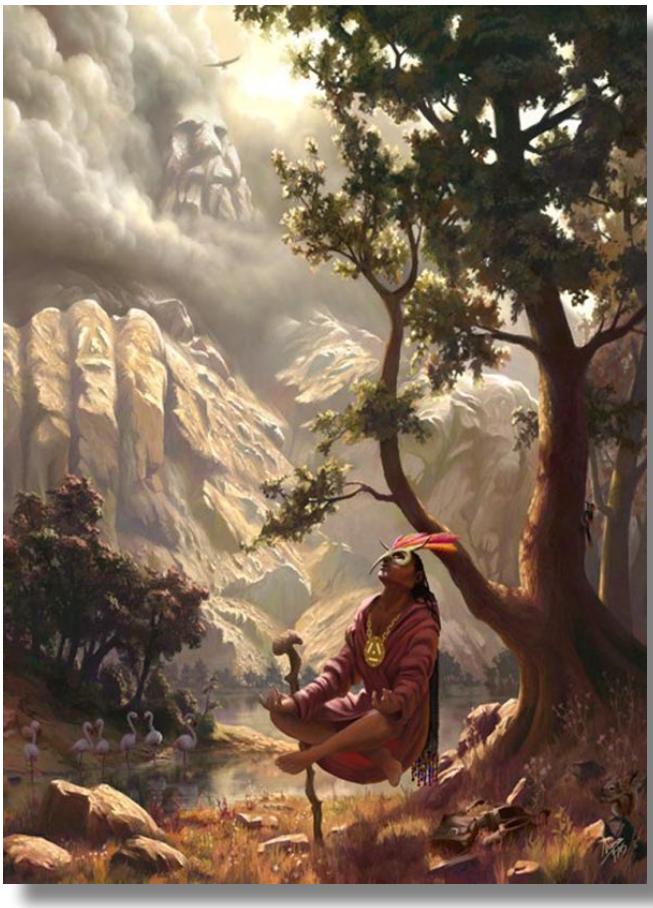
Good. The dumber the boy was, the easier he'd be to catch, and the better he would keep before I broiled him.

But that pesky, scrawny girl was swift to correct him. "Hansel, you stupid idiot, witches

continued on page 27

Featured Artist
Simon Dominic

Name: Simon Dominic
Age: 37
Residence: UK
Marital Status: Single
Children: None
Hobbies: Artwork, and most recently photography; writing, walking, keeping fit, programming, reading.
Personal Quote: If you're going to do a job, do it well.
Favorite Book or Author: Too many to list! My top 3 today are: *The Covenant Chronicles* (Stephen Donaldson), *Perdido Street Station* (China Miéville), *The Time Traveler's Wife* (Audrey Niffenegger).
Started Painting In: 2003
Artist Most Inspired By: Jim Burns / Rodney Matthews
Media You Work In: Digital
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: By choice, I haven't done much professional work as yet. Before I start working for others, I want to reach a level where I'm happy with my skills and know that I can deliver a top quality product 100% of the time.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: I can be contacted using my website feedback form.
Website URL: http://www.painterly.co.uk



Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: Unlike most artists, I didn't start young. I never had any training or schooling in art, and other than doodling in the margins of notebooks, never actually practiced artwork formally. At school, I had no idea that art was a career option. We had no career advice back then and nobody ever told me! Instead, I got started 18 years later when I came across a piece of software called Bryce in 2002, a basic 3D landscaping / modeling tool. I had great fun with it and, as a result, decided to try my hand at standard 2D digital artwork. Of course, I loved it! Soon after that I bought myself a Wacom and a copy of Painter and never looked back.

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Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I'd describe it as weird. My artwork primarily combines elements of fantasy and sci-fi and horror, but it's rarely done in the purely classical mould. I try to inject some originality into every piece, so even if I paint, say, a dragon, I'm looking to produce a dragon that has its own individuality and presence, a dragon that will hopefully never be confused with the millions of dragons that have gone before. I also strive to make my paintings realistic. Not photo-realistic, but believable, if that makes sense. I suppose it all hinges on the atmosphere. If a painting has a convincing atmosphere and the viewer can imagine actually being there, then that's what it's all about. Technique and form and lighting are all secondary.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Sometimes I find inspiration everywhere, and sometimes inspiration hides away in some dark corner, and I don't see it for days. I suppose mostly I am inspired by the art of others, although it can be dangerous to get too engrossed in other artists' work, because you end up unconsciously copying their styles, and that's a bad thing.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: If you're expecting something profound, then I'm going to disappoint you. "I Love My Fschz" was actually inspired by a decomposing goldfish I saw floating in a pond. I thought it might make a decent alien, and it sort of went from there. The alien on its own looked pretty miserable, so I decided to spice it up a bit by giving it a rider and making the whole thing a bit more light-hearted. And no, I don't know why I chose the word "Fschz" for the creature. It was just the noise I heard in my head when I looked at it.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I'll be honest and say I don't even know. I love artwork of wildly different styles, genres and periods, and I can't pick out one thing that influences me more than any other. Of course, my favorite artists will always be an influence on the way I work, but hopefully as I improve, I can define my style independently of any influencing factor.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: That's easy, because I'm still a hobbyist! Ask me again in 12 months and hopefully I'll have something to tell you.

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Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: With the ever-growing video game and film industries making their mark, I'm seeing a surge in the number of "classical" fantasy images being produced, especially post-LOTR. Nothing wrong with that, but sometimes I yearn for something more punchy and original. There's a lot of great environmental concept art flying around, too, and that's something I might consider getting into at a later date. The easy accessibility and affordability of digital art tools now means that pretty much anyone can have a go. With more people than ever getting into artwork, there will be some serious competition for those wanting to shine as stars in the first true generation of digital artists.

The Final Machine

By Simon Kewin

Mackenzie watched the universe end. It was surprisingly peaceful, beautiful, like a flower blossom closing gently up for the night, its petals folding neatly into themselves. Stars and planets swirled inwards, spiralling around and down, faster and faster, collapsing into an infinitesimal particle. As silent as the sunset. The more space/time that was pulled in, the more massive the particle became and the more gravity it exerted on what remained of the universe.

The point of no return had already been passed. It was inevitable now that all of creation would reduce down to a single point. He wondered how it was he was able to watch without being affected. That couldn't be right. But it was surely only a matter of time. And what did that mean since time as well was being destroyed?

The scale shifted outwards. Now whole galaxies, super-clusters of galaxies, were being sucked in. The rate of collapse increasing logarithmically, the end of everything suddenly at hand. And then what? Would there be another Big Bang, the start of a pristine, virgin universe? Still he was outside, remote from it all.

There was nothing left but the invisible point, and the void and he. And it wasn't the comfortable, familiar blackness of space he knew so well, but a terrible absence of space, a nullity.

Something still nagged at him that this wasn't right; he couldn't be watching this. It occurred to him he must be dreaming. It was a gloriously reassuring realisation but still he couldn't break out of it. It seemed to be a story he was stuck inside. He promptly lost the realisation.

The brutal, unlovely machine was there in the centre, part grey asteroid and part black metal starship, like a creature half-emerged from an egg. All round it, at a respectful distance, a halo of twinkling lights.

Then came the noise, the start of the Bang, an alarmingly loud noise sounding strangely like the tolling of a bell. But how could that be possible? Of course, he was dreaming, becoming more and more confused as to what was real and what was not.

A familiar figure was standing over him. She was a musician from—what? Earth's nineteenth century? He had forgotten most of his history. She had bright, scarlet hair, teased up into a ridge of alarming spikes. Her nose and eyebrows and ears were pierced with a variety of metal studs and pins. Her clothes were a deliberately ragged collage of ripped cloth, leather, lace and studded metal. She had a worried look on her face. The bell was a gentle but insistent chiming from the ship, waking him up. Or was he still dreaming? No. He had known the ship to use this avatar before when speaking to him directly. He was on board *Higher Than The Sun*. His ship. Okay. He sat up blearily.

"You're worrying about the Armageddon machine more and more. Your nightmares used to be all memories of your experiences in the Draconian war. Now worries about this device have taken over. Maybe it's time you took a break."

He smiled, rubbing his eyes with two of his four hands. "Kind of hard to get away from though, isn't it? A device capable of bringing to an end the entire universe. Hard to escape

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Interview
George R. R. Martin

Name: George Raymond Richard Martin
Age: 57
Residence: Santa Fe, New Mexico
Marital Status: Living with Parris
Children: None
First time you tried to get something published: 1971 published "The Hero" in Galaxy magazine.
Schools Attended: Northwestern University
Degrees: MS in Journalism
Website URL: www.georgerrmartin.com

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published.
A: My first book, which was a book I edited, was *New Voices in Science Fiction,* an anthology of original stories from nominees of the John Campbell award. Even though I lost the award, I thought it might be good to put together an anthology. Macmillan accepted the idea in 1975. My first novel was published by Avon in 1976, *A Song for Lya: And Other Stories*. I also won a Hugo award the preceding year for some of my short fiction.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: It certainly makes things easier with publishers. It's much faster sharing when you can exchange e-mail eight times a day versus sending letters. Letters take days to exchange hands. It has made things on publishing side much easier. Before the internet, I might get a few fan letters a year. Now I get tons of e-mail from fans. Right now, I'm about 2,000 letters behind, and some go unanswered for years. The internet has made it easier for fans to find their favorite authors.

Q: Your world and kingdoms are very rich in history (almost a 15th century War of the Roses in England—Lancasters vs. York). What has been your inspiration for the settings?
A: I draw a lot of inspiration from history and enjoy reading historical fiction. When I set out to write my current series, I wanted to create a fantasy series that had the flavor of historical fiction as well as the tropes of epic fantasy. I liked the grittiness and realism of historical fiction. You are right, the War of the Roses was an influence, as well as the Hundred Years Wars and the Crusades. But I did not want to do a straight one-for-one comparison. It's not that simple. I took a bit of this and that, plus imagination, and made something unique. The problem with historical fiction is that if you know history, you know how it's going to end. You know what happens next. In fantasy, you don't. By inventing original characters, you get more suspense. Readers are more interested in what happens and you can take make them "feel" things more.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters?
A: Tyrion is the easiest character to write. His wit and humor make him interesting to me. I also empathize with him. It is something I do with my writing, especially for all the point of view characters. When writing from inside someone's head, you tend to see the world through their eyes. Requires certain amount of empathy. Even with the villains, I get into their psyches.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: The most profound are the ones you experience when you're young. Writers that you have read growing up. I read science fiction, fantasy, and horror interchangeably. My father would call them all "weird stuff." They influenced the fact that I write from all these genres easily. Heinlein's *Have Space Suit-Will Travel* was my first foray into science fiction. I read Robert E. Howard first as fantasy, then Tolkien next, and he had a profound effect. For Horror, definitely Lovecraft.

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: George MacDonald Fraser, *Flashman on the March*. I'm also reading Bernard Cornwell's work right now.

Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?
A: *Feast for Crows* is finished and comes out in October in the UK and November in the US. That means the book tours begin soon. I spend a lot of time right now copyediting, checking galley proofs. But when I'm working on new material? On a good day, which starts with coffee, I start writing at 10am and often look up and it's dark already. I spend all day.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: Sometimes re-writing helps. The first thing I do every morning when I'm working on a new book is look at what I did yesterday. Then I start changing and polishing it.

Q: Do you have an ending planned for your saga, and are you going to stick to it?
A: I'm trying to stick to it. When I started, my goal was three books. Now I plan to wrap it up in seven books. The story is more involved now, but I have already planned the ending. Yes, I know how it's going to end.

Q: Your work has strong adult themes (incest, for example, strong language, abuse) – what has been your reader reaction to the explicit material in your work?
A: There are some negative comments from angry fans, especially about the sex. There is a strange double standard. No one seems to object to graphic violence. I can describe an axe going through someone's head and no one objects to it. But they object to a penis going into a vagina. I just say that there are plenty of other writers they can read. The majority of my readers like the adult fantasy angle that is aware of human sexuality. Sex and love are some of the most powerful forces that drive all of us. In too many fantasy worlds, it is treated in a juvenile way or neglected completely. Characters, and many of my characters, are driven by sexual demons, and I think by reflecting that, it makes the books truer.

Q: What is the difference between Hollywood and the publishing industry? You've straddled both worlds during your career.
A: I spent ten years in Hollywood. I wrote thirteen episodes for the television series "Beauty and the Beast." They were two very different worlds, but they are becoming less different as publishers become owned by more and more multinational corporations. It's becoming more like the business of Hollywood instead of art. You make TV shows that cost millions or movies that cost tens of millions. A lot of people get involved who are "money people." They want to make successful movies, versus "good" movies. They use focus groups and polling to determine what the public wants. The concept of art has deteriorated. With books the bottom line is important, too; however, it still is a long way from Hollywood. Art as part of our culture is very important. Prose was my first love and will be my last love.

Matthew Armstrong

Matthew S. Armstrong has been a veracious drawer since he was a little kid. In third grade, he drew a 5' by 5' crayon and felt tip black maker mural of a Transformers' war in space. The mural was complete with every single Transformer and even sported a detailed rendering of their home planet of Cybertron. His friends were quite impressed, but his parents were less than pleased; he had used his bedroom wall for his canvas.

Currently, he is living happily with his wife and daughter in Salt Lake City, Utah, and works as a concept artist / writer for Incognito Sony, working on the Warhawk video game for PS3. He just finished a comic for FlGHT 3, and has been working on the anachronism card game for the history channel. In June, he flew to New York to accept the Ben Franklin award for best independent picture book of 2005. The award was for his first picture book The Black Smith's Gift.

Website: http://www.matthewart.com/

Daddy's Little Boy

By Christopher Kastensmidt

"Daddy, when I grow up, I want to be an assassin!"

Garret's parents had been sitting quietly in their living room when their son walked in and made his declaration. Garret's father lowered the newspaper he had been reading just enough to make eye contact with his wife. He raised an eyebrow but said nothing. She gave him a look that said, "Have patience, Dear."

Garret's father considered his child's idea. In Tarkia, most fathers of similar social status dreamed of their children growing up to be doctors or politicians. Garret's father worked for the local government, and he had always hoped that his son would someday follow in his footsteps. However, the child's desire to be an assassin was not completely out of the question. While perhaps not considered a noble profession, it could at least be considered a respectable one. Assassins were frequently hired by all social classes, and they tended to make an excellent living.

While perhaps not considered a noble profession, it could at least be considered a respectable one. Assassins were frequently hired by all social classes, and they tended to make an excellent living.

Garret's father carefully folded his newspaper and laid it down on the table beside him. He cleared his throat and asked, "Now Garret, where exactly did you get this idea that you want to be an assassin?"

"From some books I've been reading," replied Garret enthusiastically. "It just sounds so exciting."

"Well, things aren't always the same in real life as they are in books."

"I don't care," pouted Garret. "It's a lot better than any other boring job I've ever heard of."

Garret's father hesitated, uncertain how to proceed. The boy excelled in all of his endeavors, in large part thanks to the unwavering support of his parents. In this case, however, Garret's father wondered whether it might not be better to try and make the child desist.

Garret's mother noticed her husband's indecision and decided to interrupt. She held out her arms toward her child and said, "Come over here, my Darling."

The boy ran to his mother and jumped onto her lap. He hugged her tightly.

"Now you know that we'll support you whatever you do," Garret's mother stated, "but you're only nine, and still have several years left before you have to choose your apprenticeship."

"I know, Mother," he replied, "but this is something I really, really want to do."

His father took a deep breath. "All right, son," he said, "we'll do whatever we can to help."

* * *

Garret soon began practicing the necessary skills for his chosen career path.

He decided to train first in stealth, an assassin's most important trait. He practiced sneaking around, concealing himself whenever possible and learning to use darkness to his

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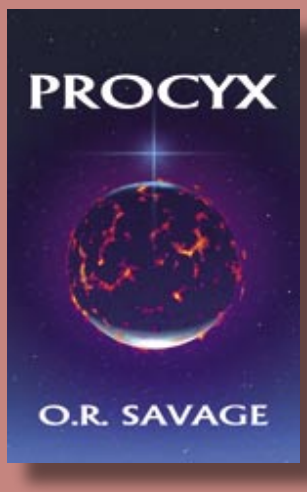

ISBN: 1586490044

Procyx appeared at the edge of the Galaxy, just as ancient Mhyrnian texts had predicted. To scientists it was a fascinating anomaly, for it seemed to be a star that shone in only one color–a single frequency of pure, blue light. But then nearby worlds began to crumble, spinning into fiery deaths while their suns exploded or smothered out in a dreadful finality called Hypermotility. Humanity's only hope lay in the Vanguards, mythical vessels of irresistible power. Yet it seemed these wondrous ships of light were only myths. Meanwhile, centuries passed. More and more star systems died and nothing could be done to stop the spread of Procyx's cancerous ruin . . . unless the Mhyrnians had an answer for this too . . .

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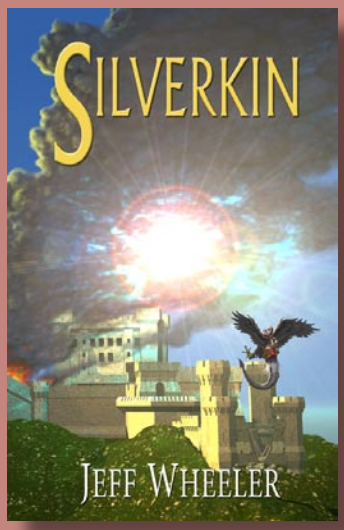

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Editor's Choice: Fantasy

Prophecy of Swords
By M. H. Bonham

In *Prophecy of Swords*, M.H. Bonham presents an epic story of two heroes. Romarin is the last in the line of kings, a direct descendent of the god Rhyn'athel and perhaps the reincarnation of a legendary warrior-king named Lachlan. Shadowhelm is a half-blood mercenary who comes from the north seeking adventure, only to get embroiled in the struggle between the kindred of Eleion and the Dark Lord, Allarun, who a thousand years before betrayed and killed Lachlan in his evil quest for power. If Romarin is indeed the second coming of Lachlan, he is prophesized to reunite the Three Swords of Destiny and kill Allarun. But Allarun knows the prophecies as well and will stop at nothing to consolidate his power and ensure that he and his master, the demon god Areyn Sehduk, prevail over the descendants of Rhyn'athel. Both Shadowhelm and Romarin race to stop Allarun, finding along the way that their destinies are intertwined in ways that neither could have predicted or imagined.

With *Prophecy of Swords*, Bonham delivers a story that is large in scale, but full of well-drawn characters that most readers will feel a connection to by the end of the book. The plot itself is a common fantasy storyline, but Bonham includes a few nice nuances, which raise the story above the normal fare. I appreciated several of the important supporting characters, including one named Haegl, a dragon that allies himself with the powers of good. Other minor twists keep the plot moving nicely.

Overall, I was quite impressed by the scope of story that Bonham was able to tell in only 330 pages. An author like Robert Jordan or George R. R. Martin would've gone on for three times as long, or even multiple volumes, to tell the same story. However, while brevity is nice, one downside for *Prophecy* is a narrative that felt a bit rushed in places. The beginning, for one, is a bit of a whirlwind. The main characters cover a lot of ground early on and find themselves in some very climatic scenes within the first fifty pages. Some readers might appreciate the no-nonsense path to the "good stuff," but I felt that plausibility was stretched a bit in the process. Eventually, the story evens out and settles into a reasonable rhythm, so this wasn't a fatal flaw. The narrative did have other pacing problems, though. Some key scenes later in the book seemed to fly by too quickly, while at other times, the main characters chew up paragraph after paragraph of internal dialogue, as they often pondered their own fears and doubts. None of this was a huge distraction, but in the end I would suggest that a bit more balance would've turned *Prophecy* from a good novel into something much more substantial.

Due to the scope of the overall story and history, *Prophecy* is one of those books that almost requires a detailed glossary in the back. I generally appreciate this touch, although I personally felt dimwitted at times for having to turn to this glossary so often to keep track of all the different peoples and gods in play. There's quite a bit to keep of track in Bonham's world. Because there was such a nice glossary, though, I was actually surprised that the author (or publisher) didn't include a map of Elren, as well. Maybe in the next edition.

According to Bonham's bio, she's currently working on a sequel called *The Runestone of Teiwas*. Although *Prophecy* certainly had its flaws, in the end it really was an enjoyable read. I look forward to seeing its sequel in print.

Possible Objectionable Material: some violent sword battles, a few bad words here and there, and a couple

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sexual encounters. Nothing over the top.

(Reviewed by Mike Loos)

Book Review: Science Fiction

Black Brillion

By Matthew Hughes

Black Brillion is a novel set in Matthew Hughes' milieu of Old Earth, a far-future world where the sun has turned orange and the planet has such a long history that many people believe that everything that can be done has been done. Several alien species now inhabit the planet alongside humans, and the world is ruled by the Archonate, a monarchy of vast proportions.

The plot follows Baro Harkless, a young agent from the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny, the force responsible for keeping the law on Old Earth, as he is paired with a good-natured con-man called Luff Imbry to track down a former partner of Imbry's. This man, named Horslan Gebbling, is currently engaged in conning the victims and family of people afflicted with a mysterious disease called the Lassitude by offering them a magical cure. Rumors abound that Gebbling's cure revolves around black brillion, a substance which does not exist.

While on Gebbling's trail, Baro encounters a historian who teaches him about the Commons, a dream realm formed from the collective experiences of millions of years of human civilization. As the mysteries surrounding Gebbling and his plot multiply, Baro feels strangely drawn to the Commons, and it quickly becomes apparent that a great danger lurks for him in its depths.

Black Brillion is amazingly well-written in terms of its prose and dialogue. Hughes writes in a genteel style that is all too rare these days, and his rapier-wit dialogue is often hilarious. The con-man Luff Imbry is a very amusing character and has an interesting relationship with Baro.

The setting is also interesting. Old Earth is a place filled with mystery, and the Commons is very well portrayed. Within it are archetypes, idealized representations of important events in human experience, and more. It is also a dangerous place where one risks being lost within archetypes and going mad, or becoming trapped forever in one of its more horrific corners. The sections set in the Commons are some of the more interesting sections of the book.

However, I didn't find Black Brillion particularly satisfying. The plot is intricate, but several sub-plots seem to have nothing to do with the main thrust of the book-Gebbling's plot and Baro's pursuit of him. Many conflicts and character relationships were left poorly resolved or entirely unresolved. Also, it seemed as though pretty much anything was possible in Hughes' world, simply because he failed to place any perceivable limits on the supernatural forces he employs. A few of the characters struck me as poorly developed, as well, and often their choices didn't make sense even after I had finished the book.

I've heard that this book is intended as an homage to the work of Jack Vance, but I haven't read any of Vance's work. Perhaps Black Brillion is more effective in that context.

Overall, I thought the book was a strange mixture of masterful writing with a half-baked plot.

Possibly objectionable content: Some ideas that many readers will find disturbing.

(Reviewed by Sean T. M. Stiennon)

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travel on broomsticks. They *live* in sweetbread houses. And they *eat* kids like us. Don't you know *anything*?" The girl, Gretl, rolled her eyes at her tubby brother and folded her arms in a huff. At this point, she obviously knew her brother might be in some kind of danger, but for some reason she didn't seem to care. "Fine. Go ahead and eat those shutters, Hansel. Have fun. The witch will probably be out here pretty soon, anyway. I'll see you later." Gretl made a motion as if to leave, but she didn't. Not just yet.

I honestly had no idea where a likely illiterate peasant girl lost in the middle of the forest had acquired such expertise on wood witches, but I'd definitely have to dispose of her somehow if I was going to bag that luscious, juicy, boy-dinner masquerading as her brother. The two children had "lost little orphans" practically tattooed on their foreheads. It wasn't often that I snared *two* orphans (and orphans are the ideal prey for us wood witches. No parents means no one will come looking for them). But if given a choice, I'd definitely take the boy over the girl. With her scrawny frame and sallow skin, she just didn't look very appetizing.

Then again, I still could find *other* uses for her.

But in any case, I needed to think fast if I was going to keep my hands on this little treasure trove. I muttered the words for the Beautiful Winter Maiden spell as quietly as I could, and the moment it took, I stepped away from the pillar in beautiful, young ice-princess finery.

The greasy, mat-haired boy Hansel stopped gnawing at my shutters mid-lick and stared, a line of iridescent drool running from his bottom lip all the way to the mossy ground like a slimy slug-rainbow.

"Wow. You're really pretty," he said.

"Why, good morning, little boy and little girl," I purred. "What are you doing out here lost, alone in the wood?"

"We're not doing anything," said the girl. "In fact, *I* was just *leaving*, actually."

"I'm not leaving," the boy said. "Your shutters are really good. And my sister's staying too, right, Gretl?"

The girl rolled her eyes again. "No I'm not, dummy," she retorted at her brother as well as me. "I'm out of here." And then the girl really did start to leave, and to my dismay (and the girl's), the boy started to follow her.

I knew then that I'd really have to turn on the charm, and I really *hated* turning on the charm. Charm goes against my dried-up witchy nature.

"But certainly you're *both* weary and hungry from your long journey. Won't you come inside? I can give you some sweetbread and tea before you go on your way."

"No thanks," said the girl. She started toward the forest path, completely ignoring her brother, who stared alternatively at her and at me, wondering if he should stay or go. He finally started following the girl down the forest path, looking at my candy shutters with obvious sadness. "Gretl, sis, wait up!"

I understood then that in order to get both these children to stay in my clutches, I had to appeal to this smart little girl's internal weakness, to her sensitive, intelligent side, or both of these kids would be gone from my clutches (and my stewpot) forever. I grabbed at the last thing I had left in my bag of tricks.

"Do you like books, little girl?" I shouted after her. "I have many, many books. Come and see."

The girl stopped short. Her tubby, drooling brother ran into her and fell to the mossy ground in a heavy heap. (My gingerbread house shook to its foundations from the impact.)

"I can't read," the girl said, ashamed.

Aha! I had her! "Then let me *teach* you, my dear."

All hostility in the girl's gaunt face melted. "Okay," she said. And once her brother saw that Gretl would stay, he immediately ran back to my house and started gnawing and slobbering at my shutters and walls with renewed enthusiasm.

"What kind of books do you have?" asked the girl.

"Oh, many, many kinds, my dear child. You will see them all in good time. But you must learn to read first," I said. "Do you know any of your letters?"

"Umm, no."

Good. That meant I could keep her for at least a couple of months. Plenty of time to ripen her brother for fall slaughter, and maybe even enough time to fatten up the girl as well.

Or perhaps, just perhaps, to find an even better use for her than just dinner. You see, that summer I'd been in the market for a new apprentice for quite some time, and I thought this smart little girl might be just the right fit.

"So, umm, ma'am," the girl sputtered. "How can I read if I don't even know my letters?" Gretl stared at her feet in embarrassment.

"Well, you'll just start off with the primer, dearie. Once you've mastered the primer, you can read anything you like. Come inside."

The boy and girl were now mine. I could scarcely contain my excitement. Being sure to keep my Winter Maiden Disguise Spell turned up to 'Maximum,' I led the children into my gingerbread cottage. I'd just had the new peppermint floor put in, and it was still showroom shiny—something the fat, ugly boy Hansel picked up on right away.

"Wow," he said when he saw the sweet, sticky floor. "Is that made of *peppermint*?" Without another word, the grubby boy was on the floor, his pimpled butt hanging out of his ripped trousers. He licked the red-and-white pinstriped floorboards with relish.

"Hansel, ewww. That's the *floor*," said the girl. "That's *dirty*. You should just eat the walls and the roof, dummy. Those parts aren't dirty like the floor is." Gretl, however, didn't seem interested in eating any portion of my candy house—roof, walls, peppermint support poles, or otherwise. I chuckled at this.

"You'll have to excuse my brother, ma'am," Gretl said. "He's so…*uncivilized*."

"Quite all right, dear, quite all right," I said gleefully. "We members of the Winter Maiden Society believe that children should get whatever they want. If your brother wants to lick the floor like a dog…well, that's all right by me!"

The girl frowned. "Does that mean I get to do whatever *I* want, too?"

"Of course!"

The girl motioned for me to step outside onto the marzipan porch. "Can we discuss something in private?" she asked, with the air of someone much older than she was.

I followed the girl outside and shut the gumdrop door behind me. "You want to learn to read, don't you?"

"Yeah. But there's something else I want to do, too."

"Name it, child."

"I want to kill my brother. I've wanted to kill him ever since he was born. I *hate* him. Do you think you could help me out with that?"

Well, this scrawny little Gretl girl was really too much.

At the time I foolishly thought I could still try to perpetuate the ice princess illusion with

Gretl, so I said: "Dear one, I am a member of the Winter Maiden Society. It is against our sworn oath of membership to harm children—"

"Baloney. You're a *witch*." The girl knit her strawberry-blonde brows together and stared at me with a stare just evil enough for me to think I just might have discovered a new recruit for the Wood Witch Society-Dark Witch Division.

"Child, you have seen through me. How did you know?"

"Please, lady. I'm not *stupid*. Everyone knows only wood witches live in candy houses. Now are you going to help me kill my brother or not?"

Well, I must say I was a bit nonplussed by the girl's fratricidal lust, even if her murderous nature was a possible asset in a potential wood witch of the dark variety. This was way beyond your typical case of sibling rivalry—even the most picked-on of scrawny, underfed sisters don't generally ask wood witches to help them bump off their little brothers. Even if I am hardly the portrait of morality and kindness myself, I wondered where a gawky girl of thirteen or fourteen could develop such hatred. And no matter how she'd managed to get so nasty, that complete lack of humanity was *exactly* what I was looking for in my next apprentice! I could barely contain my excitement.

"I can certainly consider helping you, dearie," I cackled in my own voice. (Since the girl obviously knew what I really was, I turned off the Winter Maiden spell for the moment as an energy-saver. The girl didn't seem to notice or care that my skin was now green and my hair made of worms.) "But first, please tell me----why do you hate him so?"

"Because he's a *boy*."

"Surely you must have more reason than that."

"Nope, that's the only reason." The girl took a lock of her wavy red hair between two fingers and began to twist it with malice.

I smoothed down my worm hair and gave the girl a termite-ridden smile. "Well my dear, I'm afraid I can't help you kill him just because he's a boy. That would go against my principles of membership in the Wood Witches' Society-Dark Division. You need to have a better reason than that." (I made no mention, of course, of the fact that I already planned to kill the tubby Hansel myself for my fall feast, something perfectly acceptable by Society guidelines.)

At this, Gretl heaved a heavy sigh and twisted her hair all the more. "Well, maybe I should be a little more specific. I hate him because he's a boy, that's true. But there's a lot more to it than that."

"Like what?"

The girl pouted. "I hate him because of the way my parents treated him, just because he was a boy. He got *everything* he ever wanted, ever since he was born. He never had to do anything to get what he wanted, except stay alive long enough to carry on the family name; while I had to do *all* the barn chores and *all* the housework, and I barely got a crust of bread to eat in return. Do you know that I haven't had enough to eat in *eight years*?" The young girl's sunken eyes glistened with tears.

"Such is the plight of all girl children, dearie." Sad to say, but true, especially among the peasants.

The girl went on, hatred crumpling her features. "Before Hansel was born, I was the light of my parents' life, but once they had a son…well, then they could have cared less whether I lived or died, so long as they got a good price for me when they married me off or sold me to the tavern for wenching if I turned out to be pretty. But then the plague came, and I knew, I just *knew*,

that Mom and Dad wanted me to come down with it just so they'd be rid of me."

"Where are your parents now?" I asked, as if I didn't know.

"They're dead. *They* got the plague, not me. On her deathbed, my mom made me promise, as the eldest, to take care of Hansel, so he could carry on the family name. Ha. I'll *take care* of him all right, greedy little spoiled brat."

I looked over my shoulder through the hard-candy windowpane to see fat little Hansel still licking my peppermint floor, his butt still pointing skyward. His plump rear end looked like it had sprouted several new pimples in the past few minutes.

"I hate that sugar-sucking brat *so* much," said the girl, grinding her stained teeth. And, truth be told, I had to sympathize with her. Once, long ago, I too had been a neglected, unwanted daughter in a poor peasant house, fighting for every morsel of food, clothing, and attention that was showered on my big strapping brothers but denied me. I ran away from home when I was not much older than Gretl, and a wood witch had taken me in, too—made me *her* apprentice, and now, there I was, about to take this girl in as my own.

If I were capable of tears, I would have shed them then, but we wood witches aren't much known for our tenderness.

"Have you ever considered becoming a wood witch yourself, dearie?" I said. "It's a pretty good job, you know. No men allowed, and the fringe benefits are much better than anything you'd get down at the tavern."

Gretl showed a small sign of interest. "How long does it take to get to be a wood witch?"

"Well, my own apprenticeship was about two centuries. That was *after* my initiation to the undead state, of course. You've got to do the initiation first, and then the apprenticeship starts."

"That sounds like it would be a lot of work. I'm not too fond of work. I've been working my fanny off ever since *he* was born." The girl tossed her head towards the front door, glaring through the windowpane at her tubby sibling. "What I really need is a vacation. But I guess maybe I could think about it."

"Good, dearie, good," I said. "Let's strike a bargain, then. I'll help you kill your brother if you agree to undergo the first rites of initiation into Wood Witch-hood of the Dark Variety. In fact, I'll sweeten the deal. If you pass the initiation rite on your first try, I'll even teach you a death spell, so you can kill him yourself. How's that sound?"

"What if it turns out I don't want to do that initiation thing after all?"

"Well, then I would make no guarantees." I smiled and gave Gretl a good cackle to show I meant business.

The girl studied me for a long time and finally looked me straight in my one big, cloudy eye as she said, "If I become a wood witch, will I be as ugly as you are?"

"Not necessarily. It's taken me about six hundred years to look this good. Likely you'll look worse. But you can always put a spell on yourself to be pretty whenever you want." To emphasize my point, I cast the Winter Maiden spell on myself again, making myself even prettier and more ice princess-like than I was the first time.

Gretl frowned at this. She didn't say anything for the rest of the day. Which was fine by me; she certainly had a lot to think about. As a goodwill gesture I gave the girl a hornbook primer so she could start learning her letters, and she sat by the fire studying it all day long, while her brother Hansel ate my entire peppermint floor and then started on the chocolate roof beams. I offered the girl a sensible lunch of beef stew and barley bread, but she was so engrossed

in her hornbook study she hardly touched it. In fact, Gretl seemed to find the hearty food repulsive. I wondered if the girl had grown so accustomed to starvation that she had forgotten how to eat properly.

Hansel, however, was getting fatter by the minute. At the rate his pimpled butt was expanding out of the torn seat of his filthy pants, I would have to slaughter him well before the autumn chill, which presented a problem for long-term meat storage, unless I could somehow bring the winter on early. The Winter Winds spell requires two fully trained witches to cast completely, and since my wood witch neighbor Branwen the Bad from two towns over had departed for Hades the previous spring, my nearest colleague, Hildegaard the Horrible, was seven hundred miles away. Even if I summoned one of the evil fairies to send Hildegaard a message, it would be at least three months before I could expect a reply.

But I *had* to bring on chill weather somehow, because after the children had been under my care for a week, it was clear I couldn't delay broiling Hansel much longer. The boy really had no self-control; he went beyond all accepted definitions of gluttony. If he kept eating at the rate he was, he would probably die of hypoglycemic shock, not to mention that my entire house would be eaten away, and I needed a roof over my head for the winter.

The situation was fast becoming a desperate one. This gave me an idea.

The young girl Gretl, who was of remarkable intelligence, was quick to learn her letters, and after a week of study was already reading my primary spell books cover to cover at a rate of two or three a day. Furthermore, her refusal to eat more than the slightest of morsels made her fasting body an ideal vessel for magic. If I initiated Gretl into witch apprenticeship early, it was certainly plausible that I could use her as the necessary second vessel to cast the Winter Winds spell.

That is, if she were willing to be initiated at all.

When I first broached the subject with her, her answer was simple.

"No way." The spunky teenager looked at me over the spine of my *Mid-Level Curses* spell book with a sinister cast in her eyes. Her brother Hansel lay asleep in the corner after a morning of especially heavy eating.

"Why not?" I asked. "Gretl, if you're a wood witch, you can do anything you want. Like kill your brother, for instance."

"That's nice and all, but I don't want to be ugly," she replied curtly and went back to her reading.

The girl's stubbornness was frustrating, even if stubbornness is an asset in a potential wood witch. Somehow I had to convince her to go ahead with the initiation and help me with the Winter Winds spell, or I'd end up wasting her brother Hansel—a huge supply of delectable child-meat—to summer spoilage.

I had one option left.

One night, when the fat boy and his scrawny sister were fast asleep, I went out to the graham cracker shed behind what was left of my gingerbread cottage. Underneath the shed was the storm cellar where I sought refuge during the aftermath of dangerous weather spells and where I also stored my most volatile spell books. One of those books was *A Garden of Duplicit Verses: An Anthology of the Blending of White and Dark Magic.* Near the end of that crumbling, ancient volume was a spell that could, theoretically, be used to initiate a wood witch who wished to practice both white and black magic. Being only a scholar of the dark arts myself (they are far more powerful and versatile, no matter what anyone else may tell you to the contrary), it would

be impossible for me to initiate a White Witch, but it was at least *theoretically* possible for me to initiate a Gray Witch who practiced in both disciplines. Of the three main wood witch categories, Gray Witches were more powerful than White Witches (who were extremely beautiful but could do little more than bless crops and deliver babies) but less powerful than Dark Witches like myself.

Still, Gray Witches may be called upon by Dark Witches like me from time to time when we need assistance—a boon for me—and Gray Witches can also keep most of their mortal beauty post-initiation—a boon for the girl.

However, I'd never tried the spell before. I wasn't entirely convinced it would work.

The next morning I called Gretl out to the shed and explained my plan. I even took the risk of showing her the ancient, volatile *Duplicit* spell book.

"Are you *sure* I won't be ugly if I become a Gray Witch?"

The girl was surprisingly vain. This complicated matters. I had to convince her, so I went out on a limb.

"I'm not *positive*," I said. "But the odds are definitely in your favor, dearie. You're not unattractive as a mortal, and provided all goes well, you'll get to keep at least your mortal beauty post-initiation, if not even a little more. What do you think?"

Gretl paused to think for a moment, then said, "I guess I'll try it."

"You're absolutely sure, dearie? Because once you do, there's no turning back."

The girl hesitated. "You said before the initiation might not take on my first try. What happens if it doesn't work?"

This was the question I had been dreading. "Well, like I said, I've never initiated a Gray Witch before, so it might be different for you. But with Dark Witches, if you don't pass the initiation rite on the third try…well, then you die."

"What?"

"Relax, dearie. You are much smarter than anyone I've ever initiated before, and your talent for magic is quite exceptional. I am sure you will pass the rite on your first try with no problem whatsoever." This seemed to calm the girl a bit, but it was clear she was still more than a little apprehensive.

The time had come to pen Hansel up to prepare him for slaughter. I had Gretl assist me in this task as her first preparation for initiation. The girl and I rigged up a circular pen made of very-inedible applewood in the back yard, with a swinging, lockable gate. We dropped a mother lode of peanut butter fudge in the middle of the pen as bait. I've always found that the ingestion of peanut-butter fudge just before slaughter brings out a lovely, nutty flavor in the child-meat that is a pure delight, especially with a little cranberry sauce on the side.

The boy took the bait like a moth to flame, as Gretl and I both expected he would. We locked the gate, and I expected we would try slaughtering him within two days, provided the girl passed her initiation rite.

However, if getting him to take the bait was easy, keeping Hansel in the pen was something else entirely.

The boy had grown so huge, and yet remained so ravenous for the remaining components of my gingerbread cottage, that he rammed his huge girth against the walls of his pen until they gave way. As soon as he was free, he headed straight for the licorice chimney, which he shimmied up like a spider up a drain spout. The girl and I could only stare at the grotesque sight with a mix of horror and disgust.

We had to get Hansel down from the chimney somehow. If he kept eating at the rate he was, I wouldn't be able to have a fire through the winter.

I hadn't wanted to initiate the girl in a rush, especially since I'd never used the *Duplicit* White/Dark Initiation Rite before, but with Hansel devouring my house and home faster than the whale did Jonah, something had to give, and fast.

Gretl hadn't touched her breakfast, which meant she'd already done the necessary eight hours of required pre-ritual fasting and then some. I grabbed the ancient spell book from the cellar, cast the circle and built the sacred fire, and began the spell to send Gretl into the Otherworld. If she made her way through the three gateways and back here into the Middle World before sunset, then she would be initiated enough to call the Winter Winds to bring on an early autumn cool enough for slaughtering time, and then she could help me bump off her brother.

The next, and final, step in her initiation would be for her to dine on her brother's flesh, and only then would her transformation be complete.

"*In media resistance est*, *dono momo mumbo jumbo*," I uttered, verbatim from the spell book. "*Pinkish bluish grayish brown, the newest witch is come to town. Cadabara.*"

The girl disappeared into the Otherworld with a hiss and a pop. Now, I figured I had at least six or seven hours to try to get her brother off my chimney. If the girl didn't return by sundown, I could go out to the Otherworld myself to retrieve her, and we could try again tomorrow.

But before I could even glance back at the chimney, the girl appeared back in the circle with a poof and a pop.

"I'm back," she said. "Boy, that was really lame. Are there actually girls that *flunk* that test? They must be *really* dumb."

The girl was powerful, indeed. And beautiful. Much more beautiful than when she departed; she even emitted a rosy glow one usually only saw emitting from White Witches when they blessed the crops each spring. I wondered with some nervousness if she would end up being more of a White Witch than a Gray one.

"So, I passed the stupid test and everything," Gretl said. "Big deal. Can we kill my brother now?"

Well, well, maybe she wouldn't end up *too* white. Despite her rosy glow, Gretl was as murderous and nasty as ever.

Fabulous! I thought. She would make a wonderful apprentice.

"We must call the winter winds first, dearie," I said. "Or your brother's meat will spoil in the summer heat."

"How long will that take?"

"Well the Winter Winds spell takes nearly two full days to cast. Plus, we've got to get your brother penned up again, and I was thinking about casting a containment spell for that since a wood pen won't hold him, and a good containment spell can take three or four hours to complete— "

"Yeah, well, I can't wait for all that. I want him dead *now*." The girl crossed her arms against her suddenly voluptuous chest (in addition to gaining beauty during her brief trip to the Otherworld, it seemed she underwent puberty there as well) and blinked her eyes at me with all the certainty of a trained witch many centuries old. "And if *you* don't kill him, *I* will."

The girl was powerful. She was even starting to scare me a little. "Dearie, I am sure you

can wait just a couple more days—"

"No."

"Well, kill him now if you must, child, but you'll get no assistance from me unless you help me cast the Winter Winds spell first." With that, I turned on my heel. I hardly thought the newly initiated witch had the guts to make good on her threat. Surely she was just being manipulative. I walked away from the girl with a scoff and grabbed my broomstick from its place leaning against the graham cracker shed, hoping I could use its powers of flight to bring Gretl's eating-machine brother Hansel down from my chimney before he consumed it completely.

I'll regret that moment for the rest of my life.

When I turned my back on the girl to try bringing her brother back down to earth, I failed to realize the girl was already fully initiated. In my ignorance of the Gray arts, I didn't know that unlike Dark Witches, Gray Witches don't have to feed upon human flesh to complete their rite of passage into witch-hood.

No less than fifteen seconds after I turned on my heel away from the girl to focus on her brother, a lightning bolt appeared out of nowhere. It caught the boy on his licorice chimney perch with mathematical precision, frying him to a carbon-black crisp and filling the air with the scent of ozone and anisette liqueur. The boy's blackened corpse fell to the ground with a thud and disintegrated into fatty ashes.

My feet were frozen to the grass. The Winter Maiden façade I'd been wearing to deceive the boy fell away, and a moment later I felt all my dark powers exit my body through the top of my wormy head, which shortly thereafter was no longer wormy, but just an ordinary head of gray hair. When I caught my reflection in a nearby puddle of water, I saw that my beautiful green skin and stunning collection of warts had been replaced by nothing but the wrinkled pale skin of an old mortal woman.

My powers and immortality gone, all I could do was stare at the colossal waste of child-meat that was Hansel's smoking ashes as they sank slowly into the soft forest loam. It was only the musical sound of a young woman's laughter just behind me that brought me back to myself.

I turned and saw the girl, who was now a fully grown and glowingly beautiful Gray Wood Witch, laughing her shining, silver-maned head off. A bit of blue smoke emitted from her index finger.

"*What have you done*?" I cried. "That was enough child-meat to keep me through the winter, and you—you *wasted* it all! And somehow, you've made me mortal again! Dearie, please, I beg you-"

"Shut up," growled the newly formed Gray Wood Witch. "I'm not 'dearie', Dark One. Not anymore. My name is Gretl the Great, and I'll be taking over all the witchcraft in this neck of the woods. So I'm afraid you'll have to leave now. Thanks for getting me started, by the way."

"But…but how did this happen?"

"Looks like you forgot to read the fine print on the *Duplicit* White/Dark Initiation Rite spell you cast." Gretl the Great handed me the *Garden of Duplicit Verses* tome, open to the page with the initiation rite spell, and underlined a tiny passage at the bottom of the page with a bit of blue fire that spat from her index finger:

> "DISCLAIMER: This spell is only recommended for use by White Witches. Dark Witches who use this spell to initiate a Gray Witch may lose all their magic abilities and immortality privileges if they do not cooperate *at all times* with any demands

the Gray Witch they create may make of them. The publisher of this book, Magic Spells International, is not responsible for any power loss that may result in witches who fail to heed this warning."

"You should have done what I told you to do," Gretl the Great cackled. "But it's too late now. Tough break, huh?"

Gretl the Great cackled and cackled. All I could do was walk away down the forest path, and wonder for the rest of my mortal life how I could have been so foolish.

The End

JILL ELAINE HUGHES' plays have received productions by more than twenty theatre companies in six states, as well as productions in Canada. She also founded the nationally renowned Stockyards Theatre Project, Chicago's only theatre company dedicated exclusively to women's theatre and performance art, in 1999, and served as its artistic director/producer for five years. Her plays and monologues have been excerpted and anthologized by Smith & Kraus and Meriwether Publishing, and she has written plays for the high school drama market which are published and licensed by Brooklyn Play Publishers. In addition to her theatrical endeavors, Jill Elaine is a fiction writer, essayist, and humorist, and has contributed to many newspapers and magazines, including The Chicago Tribune, Chicago Reader, Missouri Review, New Art Examiner, Cat Fancy, Liquid Ohio, and many others. She also has completed three novels of contemporary women's fiction. Ms. Hughes is married and resides in Rogers Park with her husband and their psychotic cat, Mouse.

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something like that."

"I guess."

"You woke me because I was having a nightmare?"

"No, it has changed course again. You wanted to know."

"Show me."

A wall of the cabin became a window, showing space outside. Everything looked the same. The brutal, unlovely machine was there in the centre, part grey asteroid and part black metal starship, like a creature half-emerged from an egg. All round it, at a respectful distance, a halo of twinkling lights. The ships of the flotilla, their courses shadowing that of the machine.

"Can you spot any patterns yet, any reason for these course changes?"

"None. I have searched through the cultural and scientific records of all Million Star worlds, and everything we know about all other societies, and the movements of the ship match nothing. The course, the timings, all appear chaotic. I still think our notion of a random-walk is the best; that the ship is searching for something and following some arbitrary-seek programming to do it."

"Or it's defective, it's gone wrong somehow."

"Indeed. Although judging by the normal effectiveness of Draconian military technology I'd say this was unlikely. I don't need to tell you that."

He grunted. Damn right. He watched the machine for a while, still a little stuck in his dream, expecting the thing to detonate at any moment. A pearly, yellow light pervaded the room, mimicking a pre-dawn glow. He had the whole fleet following a standard diurnal cycle. It seemed futile to be at battle-readiness.

"Remind me how the Draconians pronounce the name of the ship."

"*Isiur*."

It sounded such a gentle word. "And do we know yet what that might mean?"

"An exact translation is impossible—maybe Ragnarok? Armageddon? The Destroyer? The Final Machine?"

"That such a device could have been conceived, let alone built."

She sat down on the bed next to him. "The Draconians thought it inherently desirable to kill other beings. That was why there *were* other beings. And why there were Draconians. It is quite conceivable they would construct such a machine faced with their own demise. At least this way they could never lose the war against every other living thing. Only force a draw."

"Insane then."

"They thought the universe was theirs to use as they wished. They were unique in that they created a spacefaring technology solely in order to find more beings to hunt and kill. Every other species has been driven by inquisitiveness, population-pressure or the need to secure natural resources. Or as the result of some benign intervention, typically by the Xin, of course. The Draconians did it because they were wiping out everything else on their homeworld."

"And the Ancients have done nothing to stop them."

"Apparently. We can't really be sure. The Xin move in mysterious ways."

"Yeah, yeah." He knew that a lot of people were voicing doubts about the Xin. They had lost the collective will to live. Their time had come to an end; they actually wanted to see the universe die. They were corrupt, divided, already all dead. He couldn't believe any of it, but he did wish they would get on and *do* something.

He yawned. He didn't feel particularly rested. "Well, nothing more to be seen I guess. Remind me tomorrow to have another word with our prisoner. The last surviving Draconian

must be able to tell us something, even if it does think we're all worthless bacteria infesting its universe."

"Okay. They are coming for it tomorrow, of course—have you forgotten that a delegation will also be here to discuss the situation?"

"Wish I could. But I think I'll talk to our captive demon first. Wake me in time."

"Okay."

The Draconian stood at his normal place in the centre of his cell, staring at the star field they displayed on one of the walls. They did not, of course, show it that the Armageddon device was nearby.

It was tall, twice Mackenzie's height, and massively powerful. It bristled with spikes and spines, each limb, each part of its anatomy, modified to act as a stabbing or a slashing weapon. Its carapace was the standard shimmering, metallic green. He remembered how they had initially mistaken these fearsome killers for some sort of Draconian war machine. Only later did they realise that they were the Draconians.

The cell was bare—a large, evenly-lit cube, all surfaces light grey. It wasn't that they were trying to punish the alien. It was simply that they had no idea what sort of environment it would have preferred, and the Draconian hadn't deigned to inform them.

The ship put him inside, immediately in front of the creature. He couldn't help feeling a pang of anxiety. It barely seemed to notice his arrival. It looked down at him briefly with blank, shark's eyes, as if trying to decide whether to bother killing him, then ignored him. The array of symbols scratched onto its chest was clearly visible—stylised representations, so the thinking was, of all the people it had killed. The spiked limb, which they assumed was damaged, hung inertly at its side. They hadn't bothered or dared to try and treat it.

It occurred to Mackenzie they could be considered very beautiful creatures. "Will you speak?"

It said nothing. Mackenzie began to stroll backwards and forwards in front of the creature, his four arms folded behind his back. He knew it could understand him. They were far from unintelligent.

"There are many of my people who wish to see you killed. If you help us, I can prevent this happening."

The creature, ignoring him, proceeded to hone the cutting edges of some of its talons by rubbing them on patches of specially adapted hide.

Mackenzie pressed on. "The ship we found you in near at the end of the battle. The ship that is half-asteroid. What is its function? Is it a warship? Did you help build it? Are you a member of its crew?"

It looked down at him as if seeing him for the first time. Very rapidly it struck out with one of its arms, scything cleanly through Mackenzie's body.

The avatar being projected by the ship did not waver. The creature gave a low, grunting sound and resumed its sharpening behaviour.

Mackenzie had the distinct impression that it wasn't really listening to anything he said. Perhaps he was merely an annoyance to it—the buzzing of an insistent fly. "There are others who want to open your mind and extract what you know forcibly. We can do that. It would destroy you."

He knew the creature wasn't in the least concerned, that it was unable to take such threats seriously. Nevertheless, it did now respond. It emitted a rapid series of clicks and

thrumming tones, which the ship translated into a deep, rasping voice.

"Your empire. What is it you call it?"

"The Million Stars. And it isn't an empire." He couldn't help himself being defensive. "At the last count there were, I believe, 1.2 million suns covered by the Concordat. Although, of course, there are a few less than there were now because of your supernova weapon."

For the first time the creature seemed genuinely interested, its upper limbs moving slightly in something like excitement. "The sunburst device. Did you see it? Glorious. So much death in one strike."

He tried not to get riled by the creature. He had seen the supernova weapon used. He had been part of an evacuation mission. From a system of five planets with a total population of some one hundred billion people, they had managed to rescue about a million. He wasn't going to give it the satisfaction of telling it that.

"We have nearly obliterated you from the galaxy. How does that make you feel?"

The creature said nothing and returned to watching the stars.

Mackenzie set the walls, floor and ceiling of the conference room to transparent, so that it seemed as if the simple, wooden table and chairs were floating freely in space. It was what he usually did. He found it tended to disconcert visitors, especially those used to living on planets. It was a small advantage but he needed all he could get. He stood and waited for the delegation from the Million Star Council to arrive. The ship stood next to him in avatar, still in the punk persona. Behind him, the Armageddon ship and its surrounding flotilla continued their progress. There had been no more sudden course changes.

The Council had sent a delegation of three. The ship introduced each as they entered the room.

The first he already knew—a Shivan like himself, basically humanoid but a third bigger and stronger than the average and with four arms. Her name was Galen Jones—a full Council member now, but once a starshipper like him. But the connections between them weren't going to give him any advantages. She was well known for her demands that immediate military action be taken against *Isiur*.

The second delegate was better news. The ship introduced him as Qarim Abdul-Jabaar. He was another humanoid, an average-sized man with a bald head and a long, grey beard. His crescent earring suggested he was from one of the Orthodox Islamic worlds. A member of the benign and peaceable Church should prove to be an ally of some sorts in the forthcoming debate.

The third was a Cyber called Speed Metal. It was also wearing a humanoid body—a tall, willowy, low-*g* form, as if to fit in with everyone else. That might be good news too—a Cyber was unlikely to make wild, irrational demands. Or maybe that was just a stereotype.

They sat down, and Galen spoke first. "We are here to relay to you the thinking of the Million Star Council. I trust you will not feel at all ... undermined. Whilst your fleet is clearly in control of the immediate situation out here, the rest of us do have a clear interest in what takes place."

"Of course," he replied, as neutrally as possible. "Just as there are all the other civilisations outside of the Concordat. They are equally affected. I have not forgotten any of that."

"Very well. Perhaps you could tell us what action you have taken so far?"

He knew she was trying to goad him. He answered as flatly as he could. "We have followed the machine and monitored its activities closely."

"But no actual ... action?"

"Given the risks, I have erred on the side of caution, yes."

"A wise policy I'm sure," said Abdul-Jabaar. "And what have you been able to observe?"

"That the device appears to be making random course changes at random intervals. That there are no discernible changes in its condition which might suggest it is about to...do anything."

"Have you tried to destroy it?" asked Galen. "You have rather a lot of firepower available to you."

"I have not. As you will know, I was there when we first encountered the machine, during the final battle with the Draconians. An entire phalanx of warships attacked it and was obliterated. The machine has planetary-class defensive systems. Nor do we know what its trigger conditions are. Now the Draconians are defeated, it may perceive even the commencement of an attack as enough reason to detonate. I may have trod carefully so far, but at least we are all still here to debate the fact."

"Quite so." Abdul-Jabaar pressed his hands together and touched them repeatedly to his lips, frowning in concentration. "And the surviving Draconian you have on board. Well guarded I am sure. Have you been able to learn anything from this creature yourself?"

"Nothing. It refuses to cooperate. I don't think it even occurs to it that it could cooperate."

"Then mind-ream it," said Galen. "Surely we can suspend the rules given the circumstances."

"We can?" asked Mackenzie. "Even if that is so, how do we know the machine is not somehow aware of the remaining Draconian? How do we know that killing it or destroying its mind won't cause the device to detonate?"

"Very unlikely. How could the machine be monitoring the creature? Have you found any evidence of this?" She looked genuinely angry now.

"None whatsoever. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. Do we want to take the risk?"

"Also," said Abdul-Jabaar, "we can't be sure that what the creature knows is reliable. It may be part of a trap. It may have had ... false knowledge implanted into its brain that leads us to do exactly the wrong thing and set off the device."

"Exactly," said Mackenzie. "For all these reasons I have taken no positive action. The risks are too great."

"There again," continued Abdul-Jabaar, staring out into space at the machine, "there is the possibility of a burning fuse. Perhaps the device is merely counting down to detonation and by doing nothing we are condemning ourselves." He sighed. "It is a difficult situation."

"Then we need more information." Asking questions was better than answering them. "Have you been able to find out anything more from the Draconians' records? Have you been able to ascertain whether it is even possible for this device to work?"

The Cyber spoke now. Its voice was thin and reedy and very rapid. It spoke in a rush of quiet sounds, slowing down repeatedly as if having to concentrate on talking at their pace. "They destroyed all their records most effectively. We know only what the machine is supposed to do and very little about how it is supposed to do it. We have devoted much effort to trying to find a genuine mechanism for the cascading collapse of space-time that they threatened us with. But our Cosmologists have been unable to either prove or disprove the possibility of such an effect, although they speculate that it could be related to the so-called Missing Matter problem."

"The Missing Matter problem? Please ... remind me."

"It is an old conundrum, supposedly solved many times over the centuries. We can only account for about 99.9% of the mass of the universe. The remaining amount, which must be there

from what we observe, appears to be missing. Or at least invisible. These are complex issues, but all tied up with how a device could reverse the Big Bang, as I'm sure you see."

"Have the Xin offered any help?" asked Mackenzie.

"No," replied the Cyber. "We did ask them whether they thought the device could function. And also whether the Missing Matter might be a part of the equation, as it is known they have knowledge in this area. But they have remained silent."

Galen spoke again, clearly impatient to return the conversation to practicalities. "So, Mackenzie, you propose that we essentially do nothing. With this hanging over us?" She waved one of her hands vaguely in the direction of the Draconian ship.

"For now, yes. I ..."

He was interrupted by the ship, the punk avatar speaking over him. "*Isiur* has just vanished."

There was silence for a moment and then uproar as each of the delegates, Galen's voice the most strident, demanded to know what was going on. He ignored them all, turning to look at the place where the ship had previously been. "It jumped into Grey Space?"

"Yes."

"Well, that answers our questions over its space-flight capabilities at least. Can you track it?"

"No. It used multiple/chaotic jumps to encrypt its trajectory. It could have gone anywhere."

"Damn." He thought for a moment. "Show me the Draconian."

The image on the wall changed. There was the giant, glinting creature, apparently unaware of what was happening.

"Show me what it was doing at the moment the ship disappeared."

The ship replayed the scene. There was no discernible movement. "Was there any change in its metabolism, anything out of the ordinary at all at that moment?"

"No. It appears to be unaware of what has happened," replied the ship.

"We should have taken action," said Galen, quite furious now. "The device could be anywhere. We must act now, Mackenzie." She had stood up as if preparing to physically attack him.

He thought for a moment. Panic would help no one. "Very well. I agree. We must assume the device is fully functional and that it has been following some deliberate plan all along. I think we also have to believe it has been programmed to detonate if it discovers there are no Draconians left alive. It will now, I think, be *en route* for Draco, attempting to determine whether its master race still survives. That is where we must go."

"But Draco is little more than a cooling cinder," said Galen.

"True. We must attempt to get there ahead of it."

"And then?"

"Engage it. Attempt to destroy it. There is little left to lose."

He turned to the avatar. "Move the fleet into Grey Space and head for Draco. Be ready for battle. We have to hope we can outrun it." Even before he had finished the sentence, space outside the ship changed. The soft blackness switched to a uniform grey, the stars disappearing.

He turned back to the delegates. He was about to tell them they would be at Draco within the hour, that they should prepare themselves. Before he could, a sixth voice spoke.

"No. Do not head for Draco, Mackenzie. *Isiur* has not gone there."

They all turned to look at a figure standing at the far end of the room. For a moment Mackenzie thought someone had placed a statue there. A stone-grey humanoid figure, half his

height, stood near the wall. Its head was relatively large, hairless and with very delicate, carved features. Its eyes were wide and round. It appeared not to be wearing any clothes, but its entire body was covered with an intricate patterning of silver lines—whorls and swirls and interlaced geometric patterns that looked like inlaid filigree.

He had never met one of the Xin before, although, of course, their images were reproduced everywhere. Despite the situation they were in, he felt a thrill of excitement. This was something of a private dream come true. He wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, but he had become a starshipper largely to satisfy a childhood fascination with the wise and benign Xin. He glanced at the ship's avatar. Even she had a look of surprise on her face.

"My apologies for interrupting. But *Isiur* has jumped out of the galaxy. We must hurry now." The Xin waved a hand over the wall behind it, and the blank scene of Grey Space changed to a standard ship's star-map. It wasn't supposed to be possible for an outsider to do that. The ship simply shrugged when he looked at her questioningly.

The scale of the map zoomed out so that the entire galaxy filled the frame, then out further and further still, the spiral swirls collapsing inwards until there was just a star-like dot in a vast, dark field. The newcomer indicated a point three hundred million light-years from the edges of the galaxy. Deep in the intergalactic void—the true, empty space that made up most of the universe.

"Here."

"You don't really expect us to disappear off into the middle of nowhere, do you?" Galen still sounded angry but she was also, Mackenzie could tell, a little unnerved, a little awed by the presence of the Xin. "We need to defend ourselves, not leave ourselves wide open."

"Of course," replied the Xin, "But I assure you this is where *Isiur* has gone. It intends to rendezvous with the seventeenth Draconian fleet and then resume the war knowing you dare not fight back." The voice of the ancient was quiet, gentle, almost child-like.

"The *seventeenth* fleet? There is no seventeenth fleet," Mackenzie said. The last battle, when they first encountered the machine, had been against the sixteenth and final Draconian flotilla.

"No, there is a seventeenth. The Draconians have been assembling it in secret as the war has progressed, bolstering it from the remnants of the other sixteen. *Isiur* is a part of that fleet, the heart of it."

"Why the hell didn't you tell us this before?" said Galen. Her full anger had returned. Abdul-Jabaar next to her was frowning deeply. *Speed Metal* looked impassive, deep in thought. "You expect us to just drop everything and engage a new Draconian fleet? You expect us to even believe you?"

The Xin was unperturbed. "I am sorry, Galen Jones. It is the truth. You must understand we are not gods, we are only people. We are not at war with the Draconians. We are criticised when we do not intervene and criticised when we do. We are at a significant turning point in the time-line. Many futures are possible and in many the universe will die. We believe we are acting for the good."

"Whose good—yours, ours or the Draconians'?"

"A very good question. The answer is unclear at this point. Possibly everyone's."

"This fleet," said *Speed Metal*, "What can you tell us about it? What are its capabilities? Are you suggesting we attempt to destroy it or that we allow ourselves to be destroyed by it? Also, I am intrigued by its location. There must be some considerable supply of resources there—a rogue intergalactic mass of some sort that the Draconians are using to construct their fleet.

How did they know about this body?"

The Xin crossed to the table and stood in the circle with the rest of them. The light glinted off the silver lines decorating its body as it moved, tiny sparks flashing backwards and forwards across its skin. "The fleet has the standard Draconian configuration although it is fifty percent larger than usual even without *Isiur*. And no, I do not propose that you attempt to destroy it. As I'm sure you have surmised, *Isiur* is well aware the fleet constitutes the remains of Draconian culture. It has been awaiting the fleet's readiness all this time—its baffling manoeuvres have just been to keep you distracted and intrigued. Now it is fully active and ready to detonate. We must be careful. If we eliminate the fleet, or attack *Isiur* itself, it will set itself off for sure. It will have no reason not to."

"Ah—so you expect us to allow ourselves to be destroyed?" said Galen. "To placate the Draconian military machine. And where do we stop? Do we allow every planet in Million Star space to be destroyed because we're so afraid of this one ship and what it might—*might*—do?"

"It is understandable that you would see this as undesirable. You must also understand that from a wider cosmological perspective, from the viewpoint of all the other beings in all the other galaxies, this might be a price worth paying to save Creation. Galen Jones, they might find your attitude not so far removed from the Draconians'."

"That's an insult! We've spent years fighting them, billions of lives lost and you have done nothing to help. Now you turn up and expect us to just roll over. We will not! We will defend ourselves and attack the Draconians. Or are you going to try and stop us? Are you allies with them now?"

The Xin remained completely calm. It—she or he, Mackenzie didn't even know if they had genders—even smiled a little, although sadly. "We knew this would be your attitude. Of course, you must do as you see fit. As for us, I am here now and I have to come to address the question of *Isiur*. Whilst you are engaging the fleet, hopefully before you engage the fleet, I will attempt to...deal with it. With your help if you are willing. Now the machine is active it is also open to being disarmed permanently."

Galen turned deliberately away from the Ancient and spoke to the rest of them. "I do not trust this course of action. We do not know what we are getting into or what game is being played here. Why are the Xin intervening now? Why won't they answer our questions about the formation of the Draconian fleet?" She turned to look directly at Mackenzie. "We must continue on to Draco. That is where we must be ready to fight."

Mackenzie looked at the other two delegates. "Is that everyone's opinion?"

"I do not believe we can ignore this new information," said Abdul-Jabaar. "If it is true, and I do not see why it would not be, then we must act upon it. Of course we must inform the Million Star Council of what we have learned but I believe we should move with all speed to this point in intergalactic space and be prepared to keep this new Draconian fleet busy for as long as possible."

"We could divide our forces," said *Speed Metal*, "Send half to Draco, half out there." He indicated the star map with one, stick-thin arm. "I tend to concur with Qarim Abdul-Jabaar but perhaps we should cover all the options, leave nothing to chance."

"So you propose we throw away half our force before attacking *Isiur*?" asked Galen. "This is madness. Mackenzie, I demand you continue to Draco."

He wasn't really listening. He had a clear enough idea now about the delegates' views. He looked at the Xin, who was listening impassively to the debate.

He was remembering being a young boy on Shiva, of his desperate and burning desire to

escape the planet. To travel space, to meet the Ancients. He had been given a flashlight for one of his birthdays. It had a bright, focused beam he could shine high into the night-sky, a column of white light hundreds of metres tall. He had spent a whole month of nights using it to send signals up into space—or so he liked to imagine—methodically covering every quadrant of the sky with a deliberate series of flashes that said *I'm here, rescue me!* He had imagined the Xin receiving his messages and coming for him, or at least watching over him thereafter.

He couldn't believe these ancient inhabitants of the galaxy were malicious. To himself he admitted he probably hadn't fully lost his romantic, boyhood notions of the fantastical, semi-mythical Xin, of their benign shepherding of the galaxy and its peoples. Maybe this was a bad thing and maybe it wasn't. But that was how he was.

He turned to the ship and nodded. "Change course."

"Our course has changed," said the avatar after a moment. There was no discernible difference in the movements of the ship or in the grey blankness outside. "Once we are away from the galactic mass we will be able to pick up relative speed. We should be there within a day."

Mackenzie turned to look at Galen, who was thunder-struck. "If you will all excuse me, I have a battle to plan. Please make yourselves as comfortable as you can."

He turned to the Xin standing quietly next to him. The Ancient's expression had still not changed. "I need to know exactly what your plans and your requirements are. I need to know everything about this new fleet. Will you accompany me?" He turned to leave the conference room. The Ancient and the avatar followed behind him.

The ships of the fleet manoeuvred relative to each other in Grey Space, moving into formation so they would be ready to attack when they reached their destination. Mackenzie was in his private quarters, examining likely combat scenarios. The lights were bright, the room cleared of everything but the table they stood over. Star-charts and battle-maps filled each wall. The short, stone-grey figure of the Xin was on one side of him, providing him with a stream of hard tactical data and polite suggestions. The avatar of the *Higher Than The Sun* stood on his other side, receiving and implementing his decisions.

The Xin had told them she was a she; that her name was Metarion. Although Mackenzie didn't show it, he still felt considerable excitement at this close contact with the Ancient. He felt a little like a child being treated as an equal by some respected adult. At the same time, he was growing more and more disconcerted by the detail of the information the Xin was providing him about the Draconians. Welcome as it was for the imminent battle, he couldn't help wondering how Metarion knew it all. It was information she could only know it if she, or another Xin, had worked closely with the Draconians in the recent past.

"This battle will be merely a distraction, however," he said. "What of *Isiur*? How do you intend to neutralise it? And how long do you think it will take? The battle will be close. Even if we didn't have to play for time, I think we'd probably lose eventually."

"An open assault will not work," said the Xin, "as I believe you have discovered. However, it is possible for a small, apparently inconsequential force to gain entrance to the machine. I am talking about a space-walk, not an approach by any sort of craft. The defence systems of *Isiur* will ignore this."

An EVA across space. Okay, they could probably fit that into the battle plan, and get close enough to *Isiur* without seeming to attack it. He wondered how it was that such a gap had been left in the machine's defences.

"But how do you get inside? There won't be an open door."

"No," said the Xin, "That is why I need to take your Draconian along with me. It will be able to gain access."

That was a shock; he hadn't seen that coming. And he certainly didn't like the idea of letting the Draconian loose, especially not onboard *Isiur*.

Metarion saw the expression on his face. "I understand your reluctance to do this, but it is the only way. You must trust me, Mackenzie."

"Why would the Draconian help you?"

"It won't. It will see an opportunity to escape and take it. It won't consider that we will be able to stop it once we are on board."

"And will we? And who, exactly, is *we*?"

"Yes, I would like you to come too if you are willing. You are resourceful and intelligent. By and large you trust me in what I am doing. And you know a great deal about spaceships and all their associated technology. That knowledge will be invaluable to us in doing what we have to do. In such matters we have rather lost our expertise. Some of us consider this to be a failing; that we have degenerated. It is a long time since the Xin were, if you will excuse the term, tool makers."

Mackenzie thought for long moments. He looked at the avatar of the ship standing beside him. Her face was blank. He had given her considerable autonomy, allowing her to express her views as well as mere facts. It probably accounted for the strange personas she adopted, her informal attitude. But there seemed to be no advice she could give him with this.

A small part of him couldn't help feeling that he was following Metarion's plans exactly as he was supposed to. At the same time, he did trust the Xin; he couldn't deny it. Maybe it was because there was no one else to trust.

"But...something else confuses me here, Metarion," said Mackenzie. "If this device is only now ready to detonate, why didn't you tell us beforehand so that we could destroy it? We could have eventually."

"A good question. Is it good enough if I say we have our reasons and leave it at that?"

Mackenzie smiled a little. "No, absolutely not. I need the real reason."

"Or if I say we have only just discovered the truth of the situation?"

Mackenzie shook his head and said nothing.

"Very well, then. The truth is we were not sure of the status of *Isiur* until now. Under an attack, it might have imploded partially. Let us say, the effects upon the universe were indeterminate and we could not take a risk. Now it is ready to detonate and so we know how to deal with it."

"And that's all you're going to tell me?"

Metarion nodded her head and said nothing.

Mackenzie let out a sigh and glanced up at the battle-maps and the clock showing the time they had remaining before they emerged into normal space. "Very well, the Draconian can accompany you and I will come too. But I'm going to bring an avatar of this ship with me. A material, combat-class version I mean, not a projection."

"Agreed." Metarion smiled at him as if pleased he would be coming along. She put her hands lightly together as if cradling something delicate. He had the distinct impression the intricate silver lines covering her skin had changed and shifted around a little, as if they were part of the way the Xin expressed their emotions.

"And what of my other question?" asked Mackenzie. "Will we be able to stop the Draconian

from taking control of *Isiur*? Will we even be able to stop it tearing us to pieces?"

"It knows it needs us to get it safely to *Isiur*. It isn't stupid. After that it may ignore us or it may attempt to kill us. In the latter situation I can protect us. I have managed to survive in this galaxy for nearly half a million years now. In the former situation it will simply be a matter of us taking control of *Isiur* before it does. With my knowledge and your abilities I am confident we can succeed."

"Very well." He thought of the Million Sun delegation, of the reaction of Galen Jones in particular to what he had agreed to. He looked back up at the clock. There was less than an hour to go now. He turned back to the ship.

"How can we best arrange a close approach to *Isiur?* I'd like to get within a hundred kilometres, but not on any sort of direct vector it might consider to be an attack."

The ship frowned a little, for show he knew, whilst she ran through permutations. The icons on the main battle plan they were working from began to flicker and dart around as the ship calculated the optimum configuration. After a few seconds she looked up at him. "This will require only a slight adjustment but will place us on a tangential vector to *Isiur* approximately three minutes into the battle. Perigee will be 0.2 megametres."

"Very well, make the formation changes. And have a five-star, combat-class avatar ready for EVA in thirty minutes. We'll leave the *Higher Than The Sun* on the leeward side as we pass by *Isiur* so that it doesn't see anything. At that point you will have control of the fleet. Follow the plans we have discussed and ignore everybody else."

"And the delegation?"

"Oh ... I think we'll tell them about all this when we get back." He smiled and turned to Metarion. "Do you need to make any preparations? Can you EVA without some sort of ... suit?"

"I am quite comfortable in space, do not worry."

"Very well. I have some final matters to attend to. I will meet you at the EVA bay. The ship will give you any directions you need."

Metarion nodded her head slightly and walked from the room, apparently fully aware of the way.

"Keep an eye on her," said Mackenzie. "Tell me if she does anything unusual."

"I will. There is something else you should know about, though. An interesting ... anomaly I have been aware of since Metarion appeared on board."

"Oh?" He looked questioningly at the punk avatar next to him.

"I can't be completely sure because the readings are rather off the scale, but it appears the mass of the *Higher Than The Sun* is greater than it should be. Perhaps ... a billion times greater than it should be."

"A billion times? You didn't feel it was worth telling me this earlier?"

"I assessed it was of low importance. Relatively speaking, of course."

He sighed again. "How can this be? A mass of that size would collapse instantly. I mean, we'd just be a black hole. How can we move? How can our structure remain?"

"I do not know. Perhaps these anomalous readings are normal when one of the Xin is present. Perhaps they are real but the Xin have control over such forces."

"Or perhaps not." He had to agree with the ship though, there was little he could do with the knowledge.

"Very well. Let's assume it's a technology glitch for now. If I get a chance, I'll ask Metarion about it."

Towed by a single EVA pod, the crossing from the *Higher Than The Sun* to *Isiur* took ten minutes. They had emerged quietly from Grey Space and immediately commenced their carefully designed attack upon the Draconians. The enemy fleet, in turn, was in battle-formation and had met them with full force. *Isiur* was there as Metarion had said it would be. The encounter had matched their projections to within ninety-eight percent. Three minutes into the engagement, with the *Higher Than The Sun* momentarily matching *Isiur's* vector, they had slipped into space to walk across to the Armageddon machine.

Mackenzie found it strangely disconcerting being outside in intergalactic space. There were only a few distant points of light—whole galaxies—instead of the familiar blaze of stars and nebulae and clusters. It reminded him most of all of his end-of-the-universe nightmares, of how he imagined that absolute void to be. He was well used to space walking; it was a completely normal environment for him. But out here he found himself feeling the beginnings of alarm and disorientation, as if this was his first ever EVA. It wasn't just that his companions were a Draconian, a Xin and a combat-avatar, nor just the nature of their mission. The void so far away from the galaxy was genuinely frightening, genuinely hostile.

The battle raged all around them. The ship kept him up to date with everything that happened. Apart from the occasional, distant flowering of light that meant one ship or another had been destroyed, there was actually nothing to be seen. And of course nothing to be heard. Ships were dark, their beam weapons, mines and other ordnance equally invisible. Like all space-battles, this was a complex, three-dimensional dance of traps and feints and sudden, brutal assaults, played out over huge distances.

Isiur, too, was invisible. It gave off no light itself and there was no flotilla now to illuminate it. By switching to infrared he could get a faint image of it, half-emerging from the blackness as a shifting, indistinct ghost. It grew more and more massive with each second, its scale hard to grasp as they neared it. Part-planetoid and part-ship, it was larger then most spacecraft but smaller than most natural bodies. It all contributed to his growing disorientation. He pushed the unfamiliar alarm aside and concentrated on what they had to do.

The Draconian steered them towards the ugly, rocky mass of *Isiur's* mid-section. Mackenzie was next to the creature, his powered-suit attached to the adjacent anchor-point on the pod. Next to him, Metarion held on nonchalantly with one of her hands. Behind them, connected by a longer tether, weaponry trained constantly on the Draconian, rode the combat-avatar.

They slowed as they approached the ship's hull. Mackenzie activated lights. There was a hatchway there, a dull metal circle embedded into the surface of the rock. It seemed far too small to enter, but as they neared it became clear it was actually very large, easily big enough for several Draconians to fit through.

Finally they stopped. There was a sequence of symbols etched onto the door—runes similar to those on the Draconian's carapace.

The Draconian touched a spiked limb to a long sequence of the symbols, apparently entering a code. The door jerked, then folded inwards with a clumsy, uneven movement. Lights came on inside, revealing a room about the same size and shape as the Draconian's cell back on the *Higher Than The Sun*. The alien disconnected itself expertly from the pod and pulled itself inside. Mackenzie let Metarion go in next, then the avatar, and finally he unhooked himself and entered *Isiur*. The exterior hatchway closed and, after a few moments, a similar door on an adjacent wall opened.

His suit's sensors told him there was no breathable atmosphere despite the airlock. He

had no intention of removing his suit and losing the protection it afforded him in any case. The Draconian, meanwhile, seemed as unconcerned as Metarion was by the lack of a life-supporting environment. But then, it had just completed a space-walk without any sort of artificial aid.

They left the airlock in the same order and stepped into a corridor that curved away in both directions, its floor clearly on the inside of the exterior wall of the ship. The corridor was big, perhaps ten metres square, but roughly cut into the rock. A thick sheaf of ducts, pipes and cables was strung along the ceiling, looking as if it had been placed there temporarily. Every few metres, a harsh, green, unshielded light gave out a bright illumination.

Mackenzie and the avatar were watching the Draconian carefully to see what it would do next. In his powered suit, he was a better match for the alien. In a fight he might survive for a couple of minutes. The combat avatar, meanwhile, was nearly as tall and massive as the Draconian, and certainly better armed. Beam weapons of various sorts were integrated into its limbs and torso. But he had seen Draconians fighting and he had no illusions. The alien, injured as it apparently was, could still kill both of them if it came to it.

The Draconian, however, ignored them both. It said something to Metarion with a brief, rasping thrum, then turned and moved with great rapidity away up the curving corridor.

The combat avatar did not have translation capabilities; its design was geared solely towards fighting. "What did it say?" Mackenzie asked Metarion.

"It was just a word of acknowledgement. It was saying it would continue with the plans," replied the Xin.

"And what are these plans?"

The ancient looked up at him with her wide, honest eyes. There were great depths there, but a warm light seemed to shine out. "It has gone to *Isiur's* control room to commence the countdown of the device, in case detonation is needed. It expects us to go to the event-horizon floor at the heart of the ship and assist it, completing certain procedures manually. *Isiur's* construction was not fully completed."

"And why would it expect us to do that?"

"It believes that we, the Xin, wish to see the universe come to an end, that we have been helping them for this purpose. It believes that I have deceived you into helping me."

The combat avatar monitored its surroundings constantly, assessing all possible threats. It turned now from the disappearing figure of the Draconian to train all its weaponry on the Xin. Its gaze was neutral, completely blank. Facial expression was also not a standard part of combat avatar design.

Mackenzie kept his voice level. "Why would it think this?"

"Because we have been helping them. We have shared a considerable amount of theoretical knowledge with them. We became aware of their efforts to construct this device, and decided to give them our assistance."

The Xin's honesty was disconcerting. She had said that she needed his technological knowledge to complete their task. So why would she now say this, knowing what his reaction must be? She had clearly lied to them, had at least not told them everything. Had he been completely misled all along?

"Why?"

"You know the answer to that, Mackenzie. So we understand how the device operates so that we can do what we have come here to do. You have trusted me this far. Are you going to lose faith in me now?"

His hand shifted slightly on his own beam-weapon. "Exactly what are you trying to

achieve here? Why didn't you just tell us all this long ago so we could have stopped them building the device? Why should I have faith in you when you haven't been honest with me?"

"Mackenzie, I am trying to save the universe. I am sorry for not being completely open with you."

Her eyes seemed wider than ever as he looked at her. He could detect no hint of deceit there, but he probably wouldn't really be able to. He considered his alternatives. If they ignored the Xin, would he and the avatar be able to disarm or destroy *Isiur* before it was detonated? Would Metarion try and stop them? He tried to decide on the best course of action.

"Time is short, Mackenzie. In all likelihood Galen Jones will have assumed command of your fleet by now. There is some danger that she will engage and at least damage *Isiur*. Our opportunity would then be lost. There are few subsequent balance-points in the timeline that we can employ. This may be our last opportunity."

He thought about everything that had happened since the Xin had arrived, of the things she had said and the things she knew. He thought about the Draconian, about the attitudes of the delegates from the Million Star Council. He thought about their long drawn-out dance with *Isiur* and, before that, the chaos of the Draconian wars and the people, the worlds, he had lost.

"You don't intend to just disarm or destroy *Isiur*, do you?"

"No."

"Tell me why, Metarion."

"Let us proceed to the event-horizon floor. Time is short. I will explain what I can as we go and then it will be up to you to do as you wish. I assure you I can not act without your help."

He nodded. What he really needed was to know what the hell was going on.

Metarion led them into a tunnel leading in a gentle curve away from the hull, into the heart of the ship. It was as roughly hewn out as the other passageway, with yet more cables and ducts slung out loosely along it. High-pressure vapour leaked from joints in some of the pipes although his suit could detect no danger. There was a bright light up ahead, around the curve of the passageway. He walked beside the Xin, the combat avatar following at a tactically calculated distance behind them, weaponry trained on the Ancient.

"Some time ago, Mackenzie—around one hundred thousand years—we discovered something odd out in intergalactic space. It was a microscopic particle of matter that exhibited a number of strange properties. It intrigued us greatly. Its mass was huge, its structure unfathomable. It was utterly unique to our knowledge and we could not explain how it could have been formed.

"We eventually concluded it was a fragment of the primordial universe from before the Big Bang. This was the only explanation. For some reason, it did not expand along with the rest of matter when the universe was first formed. We had long thought such an anomaly could not exist and we still cannot explain how or why it does. But it does. We calculate that it constitutes a tenth of one percent of the entire mass of the universe."

"That ... maybe explains some things my ship spotted."

"Yes, I carry the particle with me. It is lodged inside my brain. It is the Xin's most precious possession, one of very few. No doubt your sensors picked up some anomalous mass and gravity readings."

"Yeah. But how can you possibly carry this thing with you?"

"No time to explain now, Mackenzie. No time and I wouldn't if there was. It is important you do not understand any of the physics involved here. That no one does. It is dangerous knowledge, as we have seen."

"But you understand it, the Draconians now understand it."

"The Xin will, of course, eliminate all detailed records of this technology and of how it works. We have been careful. Only seven of us understood the key theoretical element in it, and six of those have now killed themselves. The only six of our people to have died in a million years, Mackenzie. With the death of the seventh and the destruction of this fleet, this ship, the universe will be safe. The Draconians have not shared any of their knowledge with anyone else. It was part of their appeal."

"Okay, so a ... particle of almost infinite density. But why this machine? Why are we involved? The Draconians?"

The light up ahead was getting brighter now. They seemed to be getting somewhere.

"Our calculations are quite clear. The failure of the particle to expand along with the rest of space/time at the point of the Big Bang means the mass of the universe is too concentrated. Its energy level is too low. In time—around 300 billion years—the particle's existence will cause the universe to stop expanding and start collapsing back in on itself. It will be the focus of that process. It means that all of creation is ultimately doomed. There will be another Big Bang. Another universe will be formed of which this fragment might be considered the seed."

"But ... can you tell why this happened? Did it occur to you it was supposed to? That, I don't know, this is how the universe functions. Maybe ... how it—they—have always functioned?"

"Of course. The cosmological debate raged for a long time. But we could discern no hand at work in this, no reason or sense to it. We may of course be wrong. But we eventually decided to attempt to preserve this universe, to forestall its destruction. We are not gods. We are only people; we don't want to die either."

"But...the Draconian weapon, this technology you have shaped and encouraged into existence. How can the universe ever be safe now if such things are possible?"

"An interesting point. We do not feel we are unduly endangering creation. We did not really create this technology. This device has always been there *in potentia* as it were; it is an ineluctable part of the way the physical laws of the universe operate, whatever the Xin do. The fact has long intrigued us. There are those who consider this a reserve plan; a second means by which the universe can be brought to an end so that a new one may be created, like a living entity growing old after having reproduced."

"You don't believe that?"

"I am not convinced. I, like most of the Xin, am not persuaded there is anyone or anything *outside* creation that could have laid such plans, or engineered it from, as it were, a previous universe. Nor do I think metaphors of living organisms are particularly useful here."

"But in the future...maybe, a million years into the future...someone else could rediscover this science, create a new Armageddon Machine?"

"Yes. We believe that if this is to happen, it will happen anyway and our...use of the Draconians will not be the cause."

"But who is to say that some other race—maybe in a galaxy on the other side of the universe—isn't right now detonating such a device?"

"Indeed. We have no knowledge of that nor power over it. We can only do what we can. If it is any consolation, we calculate the universe will eventually expand to a point where the physics of the Armageddon Machine will no longer function."

"How long 'till that happens?"

"Around 50 billion years. This is not, I understand, a complete comfort."

Mackenzie sighed, no longer sure of what he should be doing and what his priorities were.

"But this machine. All these plans. This has all been about ... destroying this single particle?"

Metarion stopped then. "Destroying it, Mackenzie? Yes." She pointed forwards. Up ahead the passageway ended, opening out into a large chamber, from which the light was coming. It glowed a bright, fiery red.

"This chamber is the event-horizon floor. It fills most of *Isiur* and is the reason the ship is the shape it is. Its dimensions have been very finely calculated to allow the forces to be generated that are needed to have any effect on the particle. We must get it close to the centre, and then complete the triggering process."

"And you need me to do the triggering?"

"And before that to get us into the chamber. An energy-gate covers the end of this tunnel. Its controlling mechanism is embedded in the wall nearby. This ship is very basic; I cannot control it directly like yours. But if you can access the system, I can provide codes."

"No, Metarion. Let me think. You're saying we must detonate *Isiur* now? That doesn't make sense."

"Our calculations are quite clear. When this device is triggered it will generate enough force to affect the particle. Which, in turn, will expand outwards as it should have done when the universe was formed."

"So, what, the cascading implosion of space/time will be even more cataclysmic than we feared? Or are we starting a new Big Bang here?"

"The physics are complicated. In essence, the presence of the particle will disrupt the nascent implosion and throttle it, stop it cascading. At the same time the pressures exerted will cause the particle to explode. There is no risk from *Isiur* if we do this correctly. The only effect will be on the fabric of the universe, which will receive further outwards impetus, ultimately preventing it from recollapsing. The explosion will be relatively inconsequential—a Small Bang if you like. Relative to the sum of energy-matter in the universe, that is. Subjectively it will actually be...quite large."

"The effects on our universe will be cataclysmic."

"No. Disruption to inhabited space will be minimal. There will be a shock wave in space-time but most matter, being a part of that space-time, will not be in danger. There will merely be a relativistic effect as the bubble expands, pushing the stars and planets out slightly more quickly. They are wood floating on the water. They will ride the waves."

"I don't think I believe you. I don't think I trust you."

"I understand. Your exact reaction to all this was one of the unknown variables in this equation. We come to the crux of the matter now, Mackenzie." She stepped closer to him, took one of his suited hands in hers. He was struck with how small she really was. His armoured gauntlet felt very clumsy holding her delicate fingers. "You must decide what to do, what you believe. We chose you because we thought you would help us now, but we will not coerce you."

"You ... chose me?"

"We identified a whole cluster of balance-points in the time-line. We determined which of these gave us the best chance for meeting our aims. Then we laid a number of plans to achieve what we needed to do. You were identified some time ago as the focus for one very promising plan. And so it has turned out to be."

"There are contingency arrangements?"

"No. This is the optimum balance-point and the most likely plan to succeed. Our hopes are on you."

"But ... you want me to take this chance of preventing the end of the universe in 300

billion years time. In all likelihood we won't even exist by then. There won't even be dust left from our civilisations. We don't have the sort of perspective that you do. I'd happily take another 200 billion years and worry about the end of the cosmos then."

"It would be too late. We have calculated all this out most carefully. We do not, of course, know who or what will be alive all that time hence. But whoever it is will surely not want their universe to end. They would not understand why we did not take this opportunity to give the universe immortality. You can understand such arguments, I am sure."

"On a philosophical level, yes, of course. But it doesn't really mean much to me. To any of us. We are not like you."

"But perhaps one day you will be. Perhaps doing this is a part of that process."

"I'm not sure the Million Star Council would be very impressed by these arguments."

"In time, they may be."

He said nothing; tried to think, to come to a clear, rational decision. He was usually good at doing that—in the confusion of battle he had an easy ability to see larger patterns and decide what should be done. Now all he felt was confusion. These matters were all too big, too complex.

"There is another thing you should consider," Metarion continued, still holding his hand in hers, still looking openly into his eyes. "This ship may be considered an ultimate machine. One of the final, limiting products of technology. It is a device capable of destroying the entire universe. Perhaps it suggests you have reached one boundary of science, that further progression must be in other directions. This is something you can, perhaps, learn from *Isiur*."

He pulled his hand away from her, turned away, walked a few paces off. The eyes of the combat-avatar remained locked on the Xin. He turned back.

"I don't know, Metarion. You should have prepared us for all this. You should have prepared me."

"You trusted us when you were a boy, Mackenzie. Those messages you flashed into the night sky."

"You saw them?"

"Of course. We received them all, Mackenzie. You could, perhaps, consider all this to be our reply."

He looked at her for a long time. Steam hissed quietly from a broken duct somewhere back down the corridor. He became aware of a deep, powerful, subsonic rumble through his feet, through the rock and metal of *Isiur*. He thought once again about being a boy.

"But why me? Why was I chosen?"

"We identified a number of candidates for helping us. You simply turned out to be the best. You control this fleet so you have the means of getting us here. You have the necessary knowledge of Draconian technology. You do not—forgive me—have the intellect to infer any of the dangerous theory from what you see here. And you are, we are well aware, well disposed towards the Xin. We judged you were likely to trust us. Many people, understandably, would not."

"You are sure of all this? This is the entire truth of the matter?"

"Yes. I promise you that."

He almost whispered. "Okay. What must I do?"

She still spoke gently, evenly. "Inside the event-horizon chamber is a small, central platform, reached by narrow, metal bridges that lead out from these passageways. The detonation controls are on the platform. We will be able to activate them with your knowledge and my assistance. I must stay partway along one of the bridges, at a precise point, for the

physical effect on the particle to work correctly.

"Once we trigger the mechanism you will have around ten minutes before detonation. This will give you time to leave *Isiur* and take your fleet into Grey Space. You will be insulated from the effects on space/time in that universe. I suggest you send out your avatar now to ensure the exit route is clear and to contact the *Higher Than The Sun* so that it is positioned and ready to pick you up."

He hesitated for a moment more, then nodded at the hulking combat-avatar standing quietly a few metres off. "Have the fleet ready to jump as soon as I'm back on board. Don't say anything to anyone. Especially not to the delegates. Override any counter-orders given to you."

The avatar's face remained expressionless. It turned and strode quickly away back up the passage.

"Okay," said Mackenzie, "Let's go."

It was surprisingly small, insignificant in the end. It came down to an inconsequential dial on a simple, grey control box. The future of the universe, of all its inhabitants, there in his hand. It seemed ridiculous. He just needed to turn the claw-shaped wheel clockwise through a complete circle and the mechanism would be irrevocably engaged. *Isiur* would implode. Or explode. Or, if Metarion was to be believed, both in a finely calculated sequence.

He stood on a mesh platform suspended at the centre of the event-horizon chamber by twelve metal bridges that each stretched out from a passageway entrance in the rock-face. The chamber was huge; it seemed larger than the ship itself did from the outside, although he knew that was just optical illusion. It was lit by constellations of red and white lights covering its walls in apparently random arrangements.

The platform would have been large enough for a single Draconian to stand on with some awkwardness. Various gauges and computer screens and other items of machinery were bolted crudely around its periphery. There were sharp edges and apparently incomplete mechanisms everywhere. Above his head, just out of reach, hung a shiny black sphere about the same size as his helmet. Feeding into this, all the ducts and cables from the twelve passageways, along with a bewildering array of smaller wires from the various pieces of control equipment on the platform. The event-horizon core.

He was finally ready. Somewhere else on *Isiur*, the Draconian had been completing its operations, just as he had with Metarion's guidance. He could imagine its excitement at the completion of its plans, as it awaited the destruction of the universe. He looked over at the Ancient now. She waited patiently for him to complete the detonation sequence.

"I am ready."

"Very well. Let us proceed."

"The Draconian. Will it wait to see how the battle goes?"

"No. It knows they cannot really win. It is ready to die."

"You are the seventh Xin aren't you?"

"I am."

"So now you will die too."

"I will."

He twisted the dial.

"I am sorry for that, Metarion."

"As am I. But there is no alternative. Hurry back to your ship, Mackenzie. And think upon everything I have said."

The attack, when it came, was ferocious. The inner airlock door had only just closed behind him when the Draconian lunged, slashing at his body with a suddenly huge claw. Mackenzie had a moment to react and, boosted by the suit, managed to partly avoid the blow. Nevertheless the claw punctured his suit with a long, ragged rip near his left shoulder. Intense, sickening pain told him his arm had been struck too. Deeply. It seemed as if his arm was almost wrenched off as the Draconian withdrew.

A variety of alarms went off, warning him of the damage to his body and of the breach in the suit's internal environment. Automated systems responded to repair the damage, sealing off compromised sections, injecting Mackenzie with painkillers, broad-spectrum protective drugs and short-term metabolic boosters.

He had only a moment to take all this in before the Draconian was charging at him again, all its spiked limbs whirling and lunging like some demented machine. Why was it attacking? It didn't make sense; he would soon be dead anyway so far as the Draconian knew. He forced himself to stand still as the alien charged, then fired all his suit's weaponry at once.

He had to try to understand the alien's motives; perhaps it would give him some tactical edge. The Draconian was blasted backwards by the physical force of his attack, smashed into the bulkhead behind it. Mackenzie had a moment to consider his options. Off to his right, the outer bulkhead door was opening. Somewhere out there, hopefully, was the *Higher Than The Sun*. If he could get outside ...

Then the Draconian was charging again, some blackened burn marks on its carapace the only damage.

Mackenzie fired all his weapons again. This time more warnings came up; the suit, damaged by the initial blow, was running low on power. The Draconian was knocked backwards again. It was probably just having fun, Mackenzie thought. Yes. This was how a Draconian would choose to spend the last few minutes of its existence. Killing something for pleasure.

It charged once more and again Mackenzie stood to meet it. It occurred to him that with the alien's old wound, both of them had one useless arm now. A strangely satisfying thought. He fired for a third time. This time the discharge was noticeably weaker, and the Draconian kept on coming, flailing its brutally serrated claws before it.

Mackenzie tried to dodge, dropping and rolling towards the outer door. The Draconian hit him twice, three times more, sending him reeling.

For a second he lost consciousness, before more boosters kicked in. He was on the floor. Alarms screamed at him, too many to take in at once. There was pain in many places; too many to identify where the injuries were. He looked up at the Draconian, two great spiked limbs raised for the deathblow.

A bright, white light lanced into the creature's body then—four parallel streams of intense beam-weapon fire. The alien actually screamed, soundlessly, as it was knocked backwards and over. The combat avatar hurtled into the airlock at speed, still accelerating, steering directly at the Draconian. It unleashed another salvo of beam-weapon fire before smashing into the Draconian's body.

Mackenzie didn't wait to see who would get up. Time was short. Somewhere out there, hopefully, was the *Higher Than The Sun*. He crawled to the outer airlock door and fell over the edge into space.

The EVA pod was there waiting for him. He hooked a stiff, clumsy arm through one of the anchor-points and accelerated away from *Isiur*. He shut his eyes then, fatigue filling him as the

drugs started to lose their edge. He forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply.

The pod jerked slightly. He tried to ignore it, then opened his eyes in sudden alarm. The Draconian, badly broken and burnt, was free of *Isiur*, had caught hold of the long tether that was still attached to the pod.

Mackenzie checked his suit's reserves. There was little left, enough to get him back and work on his injuries, little more. The pod had no weapons. He looked around him, hoping to see the *Higher Than The Sun*, but there was still no sign. Perhaps the ship had been destroyed in the battle.

The creature was slowly, awkwardly reeling itself up the tether. Most of its limbs seemed to be broken and useless now, but still it came. It would soon reach him. Suddenly desperate, Mackenzie set about releasing that line from the pod, overriding safety catches with panicky, clumsy fingers.

The procedure nearly complete, he looked up. The Draconian had stopped, as if considering what he was doing. Then, even as Mackenzie was releasing the line, it heaved hard, thrusting itself forwards through space towards the pod.

With its greater velocity, it would reach him in just a few seconds. Mackenzie had no time to steer the pod as the Draconian closed in on him. Unable to think of anything else to do, he drew a short cutting knife from the holster on his leg and held it ready, knowing it was useless, knowing it was futile anyway since *Isiur* must be mere moments from detonation.

The Draconian lifted its one good, spiked limb, then scythed it forward towards Mackenzie, just as it had done in the cell back on board.

The beam-weapon blast was much bigger this time. A broad bar of terrible, seething energy lanced past his head and into the Draconian. The creature, struck in the torso, was hurled, burning, off into space.

Mackenzie turned to see the massive, beautiful bulk of the *Higher Than The Sun* sitting just a little way off.

"Medical avatars will be ready to meet you. Are you the only survivor?"

He exhaled a long, long breath. "I am."

Galen Jones, Qarim Abdul-Jabaar, Speed-Metal and the punk avatar of *Higher Than The Sun* were all waiting for him as he arrived back on board. Three medical avatars were also there, ready to disentangle him from his damaged suit and tend to his wounds.

Galen Jones spoke first, ignoring his injuries.

"What's happening, Mackenzie? Have you disabled *Isiur* or not? Why are we going into Grey Space in such a hurry?"

Stabs of pain cut through him as the medical avatars worked to stabilise his wounds. Instead of replying, he looked across at the punk avatar. "I want us to be the last to leave. I want to be absolutely sure the ... process we initiated on *Isiur* takes place. The rest of the fleet leaves now. Keep us manoeuvring out of danger until we see that it's started, then jump immediately. These orders are irrevocable."

"Okay," replied the avatar.

He turned to the Million Star Council Delegates. He felt very, very tired, still in considerable pain, but it had to be done. "If you will go to the Conference Room, I will explain everything that has taken place."

He indicated the doorway to them. There was a pause. He could see that Galen Jones wanted to argue, still had much to say. Then they moved, filing out one at a time.

No one had spoken for hours now. Once the shouting and anger had finally burned itself out, they had each withdrawn into their own thoughts, reluctant even to look at each other. Galen Jones sat at the table, head held slumped in two of her hands, her face invisible. Qarim Abdul-Jabaar stared into nowhere, a look of great worry on his features. Speed-Metal had gone into some sort of reverie or was lost in deep processing. He hadn't even moved for three hours. Mackenzie simply stared out into Grey Space, looking at nothing. One wall of the conference room showed the dull emptiness outside the ship. A faint reflection of his own face was just visible out there.

He kept thinking about the look on Galen Jones's face as he had explained, quietly and simply, all that had happened on *Isiur*, and what he had done. The shock and genuine disbelief had been very clear. Even she hadn't expected it of him. *What have you done, Mackenzie? You believed them? You went over there and did exactly what they wanted? You actually helped them to set the machine off?*

He thought about the people he knew, the worlds he had visited. And about all the other worlds he had yet to visit.

"How long now?"

"Fifteen minutes," replied the ship.

"And tell me—what will happen when we do jump out of Grey Space?"

"It depends. If the Xin are right—if what Metarion told you is true—then we will emerge at Spica 7 and all will be as before. Apart from the relativistic effects of the increased cosmic expansion, which will be observable but of no danger to us."

"And if the cascading collapse wasn't interrupted by the particle?"

"We will instantly cease to exist. On the other hand, if a Small Bang has occurred in our universe and the Xin are wrong about the effects on space, then we will merely be pulverised into subatomic particles within a few nanoseconds."

He said nothing. He thought about the shining silver lines that formed such dazzling and beautiful patterns on Metarion's skin. He saw again her smile. Standing next to her, the Draconian, disinterested hatred clear in all its actions.

"We could remain here, you know. The fleet has the resources to provide for everyone. We are safe here."

"You are giving me a suggestion?"

"Merely making all the options clear to you. Remaining in this universe is one obvious alternative." Her expression was neutral; although all ships had a strong and clear impulse for self-preservation, she didn't look worried or concerned for her own safety.

"No. A life in limbo is no life. This ship will cross back into our universe and the rest of the fleet will hold here. If we return to give the all clear, they will follow us to Spica 7. If not, it will be up to them to decide what to do. I can't make this decision for everyone."

The irony of what he was saying struck him clearly.

"Don't tell them," he whispered now to the avatar of the *Higher Than The Sun*, the quaintly dressed young woman standing next to him. "Best they don't know. Give me the countdown but leave them alone."

He thought about Metarion again, wondering what it would be like to face death after half a million years of life. He thought about being a boy, imagined Metarion up there watching as he flashed his messages into the sky. He thought about the Draconian, perhaps the last of its species. Whatever had happened, it would be dead too by now.

He thought about his end-of-the-universe nightmares, wondered if they were prescient in some way. Outside the ship, like a reflection in the transparent hull, he seemed to see flowers. He watched as, gently, they closed up for the night, coiling up into buds, tighter and tighter until they folded in on themselves completely and disappeared. It occurred to him that, one way or another, he would at least be free of his nightmares now.

He wondered about who was right, he or Galen Jones. Metarion or the Draconian.

He was thinking all this even as the avatar's quiet countdown came.

He shut his eyes as she reached five seconds to go, suddenly conscious that his thoughts now might well be the last ones he would ever think. Then he thought about nothing.

"Now."

He stood there for a long time afterwards, the *Higher Than The Sun's* avatar holding his hand lightly in hers. Outside the ship, as it emerged into normal space, the beautiful stars were shining quietly out.

The End

Simon writes fiction, poetry and computer software, although usually not at the same time. His fiction has appeared in Deep Magic, Nemonymous, Here & Now, Albedo One, Redsine, Quantum Muse, Kimota, F/SF, and Beyond The Rose amongst others. http://www.simonkewin.co.uk.

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advantage. He often jumped out behind whomever or whatever passed by. His parents, always supportive, accepted these antics with patience, knowing that their son would have to master the art in order to survive in his chosen profession. Even after recovering from a near heart-attack one time, his father gently patted Garret on the head and told him, "Well done, boy. You really got me that time!"

Garret also mastered the art of climbing by practicing the skill on every vertical surface within miles. He studied the use of throwing weapons such as darts and knives.

After the first year of Garret's self-imposed training, his parents realized that he was indeed serious about becoming an assassin. They began to participate more actively in his studies. On his birthdays they no longer gave him toys, but instead gave him lock picking kits, poison sets, face paints, and other tools of the trade. They even bought him a dummy to help him practice strangling and blackjacking. His parents belonged to the local aristocracy, so they could afford to indulge him.

* * *

Finally, the big day arrived. Garret turned fourteen and could officially apply for an apprenticeship. He marked an interview with one of the local assassins' guilds for the very next day. He felt confident that he would be ranked as one of the top candidates at any guild. Even though he lacked a bit in practice—he had never actually killed anyone—his theory was impeccable.

The day of the interview Garret, hardly able to sleep, woke up early. He put on his finest outfit, then ran downstairs and waited in the kitchen for his parents to awaken.

After they had all eaten breakfast, Garret got up to leave. His mother, shedding tears, kissed him firmly on the cheek. His father told him goodbye on the front porch of their house and stood watching proudly as the boy walked off down the road.

* * *

Garret decided to walk all the way to his interview, in a failed attempt to relax. His interview, not surprisingly, was to occur in the most dangerous part of town, and Garret drew many curious stares as he passed through the area wearing his elegant clothing.

He arrived early at an alley known as Murderer's Row and decided to waste some time before entering the guild, so as not to appear too eager. He found a quiet place to sit and waited until five minutes before his interview. Then he entered the alley.

Not a single door bore any markings. As Garret walked down the filthy alley, he counted until he found the fifteenth door on the left. He knocked on the door five times and then twice more, exactly as he had been instructed. A small window opened and two puzzled eyes stared at him.

"Now what are you here for?" a voice inside demanded.

"I'm here for the interview," responded Garret.

"What's your name?" asked the man.

"Garret Hidleton," responded Garret.

The man looked down at something. "All right," he said reluctantly, "it checks out."

The door creaked open slowly and Garret entered. The man inside carried a lot of fat on his short frame, and his grimy body gave off an odor that Garret found unpleasant at best. The

man also clutched a knife nervously in his right hand, his left hand still planted firmly on the doorknob.

"The interview's down the hall to your left," the man grunted. "Go straight there or I'll raise the alarm."

Garret entered a waiting room down the hall. Two teenagers, both about his age, were already waiting inside. The other boys wore ragged, dirty clothes, a stark contrast to Garret's expensive attire. Garret took a seat in one of the many chairs along the wall and looked the two boys over. The first was tall and shifty. His eyes appeared to be locked in a permanent squint. When the boy yawned, Garret noticed he was missing most of his teeth.

The other teenager just looked mean. Scars covered his face and arms. He glared crossly at Garret, and Garret lowered his eyes in embarrassment.

A man dressed in a tight-fitting black outfit entered through a side door and looked around. He seemed a bit surprised when he spotted Garret's clothing, but made no comment.

"Are you all here for the interview?" the man asked in a rough voice.

"Yes," responded all three. Garret's response came out eagerly, but the other two sounded almost as if they were snarling.

The man led the three of them to an office. He sat behind a desk and motioned them to sit in three chairs set in front of it. Garret sat rigidly straight in his chair while the other two boys slouched.

The man looked down at some papers in front of him. "Who's Jake the Rat?" he asked.

The tall boy responded, "That's me."

"All right, please tell me a little bit about yourself."

"I'm the son of a hooker. My mother always worked at home, so she sent me away every night. I grew up around the thieves and drunkards who roam the streets while others are in bed. Then, one night, I came home too early and found my mother still with one of her customers. I got so angry that I stabbed the guy in the back. My mother sent me away and I never saw her again. Since then I've been living on the streets, stealing for a living."

"Not bad," responded the interviewer, in a matter-of-fact voice. He looked at the remaining two candidates. "I don't even think I have to ask, but which one of you is Will Scarface?"

The scarred boy grunted in reply.

"All right then, tell me about yourself."

"I grew up in an orphanage in the city of Telopolis but ran away when I was eight," growled Scarface. "I killed for the first time at age ten, and I enjoyed it. Then I was sent to a reform house. When the two owners started selling some of the boys on the black market, I killed both of them. I had to get out of town, so I made my way to this rat hole, killing and stealing along the way."

The interviewer seemed genuinely impressed. "Very good." He looked down at his papers again. "Let's see, we've got one more, a Garret Hidelton. I assume that's you," he added, looking at Garret.

"Yes, that's me," responded Garret.

"All right, go on then."

"I grew up in my parents' house in the neighborhood of High Alders, where I live until this day."

The man and the other two boys all traded quizzical looks. High Alders was the finest neighborhood in the city.

Garret continued, "I performed my pre-apprentice studies at the Oak Rivers Preparatory School, where I finished first in my class. I have been studying various assassin skills for . . ."

"Wait a second," the man interrupted angrily, "is this some kind of joke?"

"No, I assure you that I am completely serious."

The man stood up violently and pointed toward the door. "Get out!" he yelled.

* * *

Garret returned home visibly disappointed. However, after hearing his story, his parents encouraged him not to give up. If the guilds refused to judge his qualifications based solely on his background, his parents would work with him to create a new one. His father and he invented a suitably nasty story for him to tell at his next interview.

* * *

A week later, Garret sat in front of an interviewer at a different guild. This time, Garret wore tattered clothes and an eyepatch. He was careful to slouch in his chair. The interviewer appeared visibly impressed by Garret's new guise.

"So, One-Eyed Garret," the interviewer began, reading the name off of a paper in front of him, "tell me a bit about yourself."

"Well, I grew up in the slums on the south side of town. My father beat my mother to death when I was seven, right in front of me. Since then, he beats me a lot, and sends me out on the streets to steal so that he can buy booze. I steal for a living, but I only kill when I have to. Well, I have killed a few men from time to time for making fun of my eyepatch." Garret's visible eye squinted, as if in warning.

The interviewer appeared pleased. "You must have a lot of rage."

Garret leaned forward and snarled, "That's all I have in this rotten world."

The interviewer smiled and said, "Excellent. Come back in a week and we'll give you the skill tests."

* * *

When Garret showed up at the guild a week later for his ability testing, however, his interviewer gave him a hostile reception.

"Do you think we're stupid or something?" the man yelled at him. "We ran a background check on you, and you know what? It came up clean! I even discovered that you come from a wealthy family. Now get out of my sight before I assassinate you myself!"

* * *

Garret spent days in bed, distraught. He felt like all his years of practice had been for nothing. He would never even have the chance to show off his skills.

His parents knew they had to do something. The two of them spent a long time talking it over.

* * *

One afternoon, Garret heard a knock on his door.

"Come in!" he shouted.

Garret's parents walked in solemnly and sat down on the bed beside him. They noticed that his eyes were bloodshot from hours of crying.

His father placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Garret, we always said we'd do whatever it took to help you out."

"I know, father," Garret replied, sniffling. "Thanks for everything, but there's just no way around it. Those assassins are all prejudiced against rich kids like myself." Garret began sobbing openly.

"Well, we believe there is one way," his father responded. He looked toward his wife and she nodded. "Your mother and I have been talking," he continued, "and I think we've found a solution."

Garret stopped crying. He looked up, a glimmer of hope in his eye. "What is it, father?"

"You're going to have to murder us."

"What?" exclaimed Garret.

"Now don't be like that, Honey," his mother said gently. "It's for the best."

"Exactly," added his father. "Just imagine: a wealthy boy kills his two loving parents for no apparent reason. It's completely insane!" Garret's father smiled, visibly pleased with the brilliance of the plan.

"I don't know," said Garret, still in shock.

"It's the best career move you could possibly make," continued his father, becoming more enthusiastic with every word. "Killing us will prove without a doubt that you're ruthless enough to be a professional assassin."

Garret's mother saw her child wavering and said, "Please, Honey, do it for us."

Garret sat in silence for several minutes. Finally, his father reached out and gently lifted Garret's chin. Looking his child straight in the eye, he said, "It's the only way, son."

Garret sighed resignedly. "All right, just let me grab a few things for the job."

As Garret was leaving the room to get his equipment, his father called out, "Garret!"

Garret stopped and turned around. "Yes, father?"

"If you make it particularly violent, it will count more."

"All right, Daddy."

Garret walked out.

His father turned to his mother, a single tear falling down his face.

"I'm so proud of that boy," he said.

The End

Chris is managing partner of Southlogic Studios, Latin America's largest game development company. He has participated in the creation of many internationally published video games, in some cases as director and/or producer. "Daddy's Little Boy" is Chris's first published fiction.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

Continued from Issue 40

Julianna's Awakening (Part 2)

By Aline de Chevingy

His first reaction was to protect her, to step around her, and shield her from the slayer. His body screamed at him to keep her safe, yet he stayed still. He needed Miya to trust him, and the fastest and easiest way to do that was to trust her.

"What? Aren't you going to deny my accusations against you, Demon?"

Tores slowly shook his head in the negative. "Why should I? If I deny the accusations, I create doubt as to my honesty. I'd rather trust in Miyalia. She's a bright, beautiful woman with a mind—" Tores stepped forward and put his hand on Miya's shoulder, "and heart of her own. She'll weigh the information and make her own decisions."

Miya hadn't relaxed her stance or pulled away from him, always a good omen in his mind. The slayer's frown deepened at his words. She slowly pulled her sword from its scabbard with a soft scrape.

"Don't do it, Julianna. I won't allow you to hurt him!"

Julianna sniffed in disgust. "You, poor girl, are under his coercions. You're his slave. I expect nothing less to come from your lips."

Tores grinned at Miya's protective tone. He felt her shoulders stiffen beneath his hands at the slayer's insult. "Now you listen to me, you murdering maniac. I am not his slave, I am no one's slave."

Julianna answered with a loud throaty chuckle. "Then what do you believe you are to him?"

Miya stood straighter, taller before him. She reached back for his arms and wrapped them around her waist in an open act of defiance. "His mate! According to Dragon Law, I'm his wife!"

"His what? Dragons don't marry those not of their race, girl-child. Proof that the Demon has told you nothing but lies!"

Tores felt like someone had beaten him over the head with a board. A reaction he made certain not to show either Miya or Julianna. She'd admitted to being his mate. A feat he took great pride in—her trust was not easily earned.

"I'll admit that Tores has kept secrets from me in the past."

"Of course he has, he's a Demon."

"But!" Tores knew the warning signs for Miya's temper; still he took a step closer to her in a show of support. "I've also kept secrets from him, Julianna."

"It's wise to keep secrets from Demons."

"Don't call my mate a Demon. You, Julianna, are the sole reason we've bonded."

As much as Tores wished to lay all the blame at the slayer's feet, he knew he couldn't. "Meamorea, you can't lay our bonding solely at her feet."

With total disregard to the slayer, Miya turned her back on Julianna and looked up at him. "If she hadn't killed that Dragon I tried to save, would we be here right now?"

"No, love."

"If she hadn't kidnapped me away from you, would you be calling me Meamorea?"

Tores smiled and stroked her cheek affectionately. "Yes."

"Yes?"

There was so much he still needed to tell her. So much she needed to know about his kind. Now was not the time for it. "Miyalia, the slayer is correct about one thing. Dragons do not normally marry outside their race."

Victory-laced laughter startled them out of the cocoon they'd created around themselves. "I told you, girl—"

"Oh shut up, Julianna, I don't want to hear it. Tores, please explain this to me. Your mother married an Elven Lord?"

Tores stroked the hair from her face before answering. "My mother was bound in her human form, therefore not considered a Dragon by her peers. Also, my mother did what no other Dragon before her had ever dreamed of doing. She fell in love."

Miya's hand came up to caress his cheek as understanding dawned on her. "Is that so bad? Look at what came from that union."

Closing his eyes briefly, he leaned into her touch. "A child neither loved nor wanted. A betrayal that changed them both for life."

"No, Tores. They created a man who cared enough to put his life on the line to save an Herbalist. A man that I—"

Movement caused Tores to switch on his Dragon sight. The move was automatic these days, but it allowed him to see Julianna's attack. Quickly pushing Miya behind him, he shifted to his Dragon form, letting his scales absorb the blow from her sword. With a growl of rage, Tores used his tail to send Julianna flying out of the cave. "Don't ever try to harm my woman." His deepened Dragon voice rumbled in anger.

Tores stepped from the cave, rainbows glinting off his pure white scales. "You can try all you wish to kill me, slayer, but Miya is off limits." Blood lust had him completely in its grasp. Red rage filled his vision when he saw the sneer on Julianna's face. A rage he knew he couldn't control, nor did he wish to. That human couldn't be trusted.

A soft touch up his back, the familiar feel resonating through his scales, took his attention away from the slayer before him, but not his eyes.

"Tores, my love, let her go."

"Never."

A feather-soft touch ran up his arm, over his shoulder, and around to his chest. He felt the blood lust receding as Miya kept his attention focused solely on her. His respect for her talents rose another notch as she filled his field of vision. Her hand ran up his chest to cup his face, making certain he couldn't look away.

"You are beautiful in your Dragon form, my love."

Her words pulled a low growl from his throat as he shifted back to his human form.

"Let her go, Tores. Consider this her last warning, and if she attacks us again, her life is forfeit."

Tores gathered Miya into his arms, crushing her to his body. "Only for you, Meamorea."

Miya must have sensed the tenuous hold he had on his temper. She turned to face Julianna without breaking physical contact with him.

"Why? I don't understand. A Demon never allows anyone to tell him what to do."

"Tores isn't a Demon, Julianna." The anger in her voice stunned him. Nothing in all the years he'd known her had ever tempted Miya to raise her voice.

"Don't be a fool, girl. You saw him change with your own eyes."

Tores felt no guilt when he saw that Julianna was bleeding from the blow he'd landed to protect his mate.

"Yes, I did. He never would have shifted if you hadn't tried to harm me. You are responsible for your wounds, Julianna, not Tores."

A low, menacing growl stopped Julianna the minute she took a step forward. "Don't, Julianna! I won't stop him the next time."

"You would side with—"

"Don't say it. The only person with any rights to call my mate names is *ME*!"

Her angry words brought a possessive smile to his lips. "Can we stick to love or lover, Meamorea? At least until after our mating ceremony is completed?" he teased, laying a soft kiss on her neck.

"We'll discuss it later. When we're alone."

A draconic grin split his features as his eyes burned a bright red in anticipation. "Then I highly recommend the Slayer take her leave of us immediately."

* * *

The moment his attention was focused on the girl, Julianna made good her escape from the cave. She made her way out of Dwarven territory as fast as her bruised and battered body let her. Her mind ran in circles, going over every word, action and facial expression she'd witnessed that night.

The girl Miyalia had protected the Demon, called him her mate. Had teased and flirted with him, and been responded to in kind. A human never did that unless they were under the Dragon's coercions.

Julianna felt confused. She knew Miyalia hadn't been under any coercive spells; her gift had told her so. Then why would Miyalia act that way? Could it be she truly did love the Dragon? Could she be correct? Is it possible that all Dragons weren't Demons? That they weren't all evil?

Exiting the Dwarves' Kingdom, Julianna made her way along one of her many safe routes, towards home territory to find the cave she kept stocked with medicinal supplies. She patched her wounds, then settled herself in to pray for guidance from her god and goddess. She would find answers to this new dilemma the Dragon and his mate presented. "My gods will know what I should do."

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Continued from Issue 40

Oren's Blade (Part 2)

By Kim Knox

Flint's eyes shot open.

Her Magic stretched through every inch of rock, twisting, rushing. Pain spasmed along exposed nerves. She bit at her lip, tasting more of her own blood. Hot copper thick in her mouth. Nails dug into her palms, needing to use the pain to focus, to focus. She tried to control…but Flint knew she had never been a very good Mage. The Emperor had obviously known—

Her spine arched.

She shrieked against the rock.

No. She had no need to worry about Lucas.

The mountain would eat her whole—

Lucas.

There. She could see him through the haze of her own magic that streaked through the rock, the air.

Gold burning through his eyes, sharp white teeth. Pure Wolf Blood. His Shifting a sour rush in her lungs. And then something twisting in the air between them, gleaming, jagged crystal caught in the moons' light.

Oren's Blade.

Hunted for centuries.

The symbol, the power of the First Emperor, used to mould the races of the Empire. With it, he created the Mages, the Wolf Blood…

"Take it."

That voice. Her gut twisted into a tight knot, all pain forgotten. He was dead. Had been for five long years, savaged by the Wolf Guard. The one stark image seared into her mind. Finding his broken body in the white-tiled courtyard, dark blood in a spreading pool and one of them still there… Lapping.

Flint cut out the memory of what she had done. The stain of it still—

"Take the Blade. Avenge me."

Her husband. But it couldn't be…

"He didn't kill you—"

"He's Wolf Blood. Look at him. They're all the same!"

Lucas had Shifted. The man was gone. There were flecks of blood on his long muzzle. Had he been one of them, paid for the kill in blood? Flint thought she had tracked them all. Had one escaped her?

Fury curled tight in her stomach.

"Avenge me."

"Yes…"

Golden eyes fixed on the crystal dagger. Taloned hands itched. It would be the last thing Lucas ever took from her. Her hand shot out, gripped the Blade, locked her fingers with his.

Images. Firing through her mind.

The fiercest…holding a woman, Mage fire still bubbling, scorching over her face, her throat, the leather- and metal-studded tunic cindered and melted. Something about her was familiar… Something… The mark cut into her clear cheek. A Family Crest. Her *husband's*

Crest.

And knowing that it was Arrissa, Lucas' mate.

That she—

Golden eyes impacted hers.

He knew. He *already* knew the tangled mess old hatreds had made of their lives.

"Avenge us."

Voices. Beating at her skull, needing her to stab the Blade into this chest. Puncture his heart. *Feel* his death—

She was a Rock Mage. Wisps of magic curled from her fingers, sank deep into the jagged crystal. Fed it. Felt the heat bleed through the fine, fine fissures, bloat them, crack them.

Voices.

Screaming.

"No more! It stops with me."

Searing white light. Burning skin. Splintering.

Then nothing.

* * *

"Flint?"

Cool rock against her face. Her fingers curled, digging into dribbles of stone. Her magic… ? But she couldn't find the strength to touch the stone. A warm hand rested heavy on her shoulder.

"She wanted me to kill you."

"I know."

"I—"

Flint heard the hesitation in his voice, felt his fingertips dig briefly into her shoulder. He had taken a Blood Oath on his mate's killers. As had she. But something… Her throat was tight. Had Lucas somehow already forgiven her? She made herself speak, but couldn't talk about that… Not yet. "Don't worry about it. I couldn't kill you, either." A smile curved Flint's mouth. Even her lips ached. "What sort of mortal enemies are we?"

Soft, warm laughter that widened her smile. "So we take this back to the Emperor." Lucas picked up the slender Blade of dulled crystal.

Flint groaned and willed herself to sit up. Surprised, she found strong hands helping her. "It's dead, Lucas," she muttered. "Useless. I think… I think that's what the Emperor wanted. What he knew…we...could do."

She stared into the deepening blue of the sky. Stars splashed in a curving, milky wash, the moons, The Child and The Mother, bright and sinking. Had that Blade fuelled their hatred for so long? Flint scrubbed at her face. She didn't know and she didn't care.

It was over and she could go home to her children.

She caught Lucas' human profile, shining silver in the moons' light.

"So, tell me about your mate."

Flint sighed. She had to start to make things right.

"Tell me about Arrissa."

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Continued from Issue 40

To The Shores of Triple, Lee! (Part 2)

By A. M. Stickel

We'd almost reached Camp Alpha's shield when Lee yelled, "Duck and roll, Troops!" I heard the shrill blast of a whistle and recognized it as the one Lee used to single out one of us for discipline. Only this time, there was an answering echo from the shield, which forced us to cover our ears as we rolled *under* the wall.

Mama Hen Shield had just lifted her feathers for her chicks. We felt the electrical itch of the energy field brush across our bodies, and then heard the satisfying *splat* of those pursuers who had been a little too hot on our heels.

Catching our collective breaths, Reston, Wolfe and I finally found enough air for questions. Lee answered us patiently, one by one, in order. The troopers not monitoring the shield, or otherwise occupied, gathered around to hear what their sergeant had to say.

"Reston, the enemy troops couldn't follow us inside because they have the wrong biosignatures. A signal-addressed shield only recognizes Terrans."

"No, Wolfe, our Dryl discoverer, with nothing on but boots and a freeze blaster, wasn't the usual breed of warrior. The see-through skin signifies the suicidal warrior-priest caste. Yeah, the sight of internal organs was yucky, but the stink when they came out was worse, wasn't it?"

"Right, Horus, they were looking to take prisoners. They keep hoping to discover enough about our technology to even up the score with the E-Lur, and then breed enough Terrans for a homegrown slave population, so they don't have to pay for our clean-up work anymore."

Solberg's reedy voice piped up from the rear, "Why didn't you guys run for the shield in the first place?"

Lee narrowed his eyes and shook his head at the stupid question. "We had to wait until the strafing from above was over, and they had their own troops on the ground. You greenies still have a lot to learn."

I chimed in, "Would it make sense for them to risk hitting their holiest warriors with friendly fire, guys?"

"What about the E-Lur, then, Horse?" Solberg retorted, smirking. I could see he thought he'd put both Lee and me on the spot.

Lee winked at me and motioned for the group to follow him into the dome where the shield monitors were hard at work with their equipment. We were treated to a rare sight on the big overhead screen covering a huge section of our central dome. There sat the shiny, heavily-armored E-Lur ground troops, lounging among the rocks, watching and waiting for the Dryl to finish wearing their warriors out, before taking the offensive themselves.

Besides hating the heat, E-Lurians were used to much lower gravity. Despite their best efforts, they hadn't been able to design effective armor that protected them from both unusual heat and uncomfortable G-force. Our screen also showed the Dryl, unbothered by the heat, wasting most of their time gesticulating skyward in warding motions they thought protected them from the evil of *Cue* and *Eight*. Every now and then the sluggish E-Lur would rouse enough to vaporize a Dryl who came within range.

The dome show went on. After checking the bodies of those fallen in the initial onslaught, the Dryl freeze-rayed the dead Terrans, as if disappointed about not getting to us live ones, or to

the safely armored E-Lur.

With a "Show's over!" Lee called everyone to order and assigned new tasks all around, saying, "From now on, for at least awhile, your biggest enemy is going to be boredom, unless you keep busy."

* * *

The Dryl and E-Lur had moved their fight to Terran Camp Beta, a short distance from us on open, sandy ground. Having learned our lesson, Alpha kept her guard up while our shield techs worked on shifting the field to cover the new latrine we'd dug. It also gave them a chance to vent the area under the shield, preventing toxic buildup.

"Horus, I want you and Reston to help the botanist expand our camp's greenhouse. That way we won't have to shift the shield so often. The well we're over seems like it can support some pretty decent hydroponics."

"Sir, yes Sir!" I saluted and went to work immediately. I knew Wolfe had been reassigned to the nanite-detection squad and trusted in her ability to prove that our area remained relatively uncontaminated.

Arriving at the greenhouse dome, I encountered Reston, who took me aside. "Camp Beta's in trouble. They got careless, and some mean nanites crept into their fresh food supply; they had to vaporize the greenhouse, slag some latrines, and go back on synth-grub. Still, a whole bunch of them had to be light-gated to emergency quarantine facilities."

"Looks like one or more of us will be making some fresh-food runs to Beta. Who do you think Sarge will pick, Reston?"

Reston shifted uneasily, "You don't hear me volunteering, especially after I peed in my pants out there under the boots of a see-through warrior."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "We all did, good buddy. Let's put our bad scene behind us, and tackle the hydroponics maze, okay?"

We set to work, both of us quiet and preoccupied. I hoped the E-Lur would realize that contaminating Triple for us Terrans and their Dryl rivals meant they were only making more messes for their colonists – if they won – which the colonists would probably pay us to clean up, as usual. I wasn't as worried about the present hexes and future taboos the Dryl would inflict. They only affected the Dryl faithful, not infidels like us.

The hydroponics worked almost too well, and we produced a bumper crop. Lee decided to let two of us pair off. Only eight were committed enough. I wanted to continue missions out in the galaxy, as did most of the troops. Four couples put their names in the helmet, two to a card. Wolfe and Reston won. The next drawing was for two fresh-food runners. Lee and I won that one.

Although everyone else was surprised Lee'd put his name in, I wasn't. I was also relieved not to be making the run with a chort like Solberg.

Thanks to the nearby moons, night on Triple was almost as bright as day, but Lee and I did have good camo, and shared a miniature stealth generator. Although not impervious like a shield, the generator's field would dampen our heat signature, scent and noise.

The night of Reston's and Wolfe's pair commitment ceremony, Lee and I set out for Beta Camp leading an anti-grav sledge loaded with delectable garden goodies. Instead of a honeymoon, the newlyweds were posted at the shield-interrupt site to guard our exit.

All was going according to plan as we left with our cheeks burning from Wolfie's kisses. I manhandled the sledge down-slope onto the sand. Lee kept an eye on both the multi-viewer and

the nanite-detector. When he said, "Hot spot: veer!" and pointed, I jumped to it. I didn't want to end up in quarantine.

There's an old Terran war rhyme about a soldier returning home to his sweetheart, ending with: "Lips that touched nanites will never touch mine." I didn't want to find out the full implications of the verse, but suspected it had a lot to do with almost all Space Corps offspring being brought up in crèches. Corps couples rarely lived long enough to reproduce, let alone spend any time with their kids. I hoped Reston and Wolfe could beat the odds.

We were relieved to find everything calm outside Beta's shield. They knew we were coming, but neither the E-Lur nor the Dryl did. A low dune hid the Dryl transport, although the call to prayer was being broadcast loudly from it. The faithful wanted to find favor with the Great Invisible. Between the E-Lur encampment and Camp Beta, a sacrifice had been staked out to appease the moon demons. E-Lur braves, not busy recharging their armor like the rest, were having fun turning the sand around the Dryl female to glass. Some were making obscene gestures. (We *had* learned about those before being light-gated.) From the sound of her, she wasn't going to go down easy.

"She's screaming, 'Curse you, unbelievers!' and other things not meant to be translated for tender ears like yours," said Lee. I could see Lee twiddle the control on the viewer and heard him grunt in dismay. "We've got a problem."

"Sir, I already know you have to whistle us under Mama Shield Beta."

"We've got more than one mama here, Trooper."

"Let me have a look." Sure enough, the viewer was focused on the naked sacrifice's glassy belly, and it showed movement of a tiny body within.

"That's barbaric. Why would they sacrifice her?" I gasped.

"We'll find out after we rescue her."

"Just how are we supposed to accomplish such a rescue?"

"Greenie, leave that to me." Then he blew the whistle. When the shield went up high enough, we dumped everything out of the sledge, and he called to the surprised faces within, "Sorry we can't stay to chat. Enjoy the chow. We gotta run along now." The shield slammed down.

The next thing I knew we were in the center of the makeshift sacrificial grounds ready to load up the struggling Dryl lovely and thereby convince unbelievers of her Great Invisible's omnipotence.

Lee proved remarkably fluent in Dryl-speak, and finally succeeded in calming down the would-be sacrifice. Sensibly realizing we wouldn't turn her over to the nonexistent mercy of her own kind, she agreed to come along peacefully, sworn on both her honor and by her Divine Protector to behave.

Arriving back at Camp Alpha, Lee whistled up the wall and went in alone, leaving me with the transparent lady. I tried not to stare, but she eyed me boldly as if she could see *my* insides. Shame for the prejudices most recently acquired from my time in the hole made me blush. Compared to me, she was brave, even if for the wrong reason.

At last, Mama Alpha blanked her shields for our prisoner long enough for me to hustle her inside. She seemed to enjoy riding on the sledge. We brought out a translation unit so that the Dryl-speak could be turned into Terran for the curious troops. She answered our questions as patiently as had Lee.

"You've asked who I am. I was a warrior princess of the Dryl until I was given to an E-Lur prince as an experiment in peacemaking. No, our names are not important. More important

is that, despite our differences, we found love. The child I carry is our child. Dryl science made him possible. Most E-Lurians, however, still refuse to be one with the Dryl. Those Dryl who feel the same killed my child's father. I heard the call of the Great Invisible to join my prince. Even though this night I escaped, I have lost the will to live. If you choose to save my child by providing a host mother, then you might yet accomplish what his father and I have failed to do. Have you a candidate?"

Wolfie came forward and put her hand on the princess's shoulder. She didn't need to say anything. They just looked at each other and nodded. Reston followed his bride, for once not twitching nervously, but standing tall and proud. Lee motioned to one of several anxious medics.

"Medic, prepare three for light gating," ordered Lee.

"Sir, yes Sir," said the medic, helping the Dryl princess from the sledge.

She gazed at us, one by one, as she was led away, saving me for last. I felt a ripple of understanding sweep through me that needed no translation.

Later, when I asked Lee about his familiarity with the Dryl language, he winked and answered, "Why not ask my grandma some day?"

I stood at attention and saluted him, singing the song he most loved to hear, "Sir, yes Sir!"

And that, Your Majesty, is how you came to be raised in the crèche like me, and why I was chosen to take you to visit your other two home worlds, since now you're of age. Seems like only yesterday I was eighteen, myself. Inside I still feel eighteen. I think High Commander Lee does too.

The End

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Continued from Issue 40

A Bit of Karma (Part 2)

By Nicole Sherene Goethals

The man in the coat stayed in Melanie's thoughts long after she woke. Her dream specifically pointed in his direction, and she wasn't certain what to make of it. She didn't recognize him, and for all the sense of maliciousness she carried with her, she'd no idea what any of it meant. And with little to do during the day but think, he remained in her thoughts.

The full moon, or moons if she dared call them such, was a week off, and too much thinking was dangerous for her. So, she planned a trip to town. She'd made some new bracelets to drop off at the visitors center at the edge of the town. Focusing on the humming would take her mind off her new problem and keep her occupied. Besides, she needed to see if any of her jewelry had sold in the last couple weeks.

She'd fashioned a walking staff out of a nearby tree, if you could call it that. The struggling thing was no match for the dry desert, and Melanie hadn't felt bad for putting it to good use. The rocks could be tricky, and she didn't like to think about obtaining an injury in such a remote place with no one to care whether she lived or died.

The walk to the center was long and boring, just like the rest of her recent existence. She began the humming early, just to keep the internal voices silenced. She now understood why people went insane when solitarily confined. No noise allowed the mind to run rampant, and that wasn't good for anyone, not without a way to vent all that pent-up energy.

The locals weren't an enterprising bunch, so they didn't surprise her with their usual reactions to her presence. After picking up her meager earnings, she headed further into town to purchase some basic supplies.

Borrengo Springs only had the one mall, but it was enough to appease Melanie for a while. Nothing like the malls back in San Diego, it was more of a shopping center than an actual mall. She took her time glancing at items she could ill afford anymore. She spent a longer amount of time perusing beads and similar material to trigger ideas for future jewelry, and profits.

As she left a familiar Native American store, she noticed that the crowd was thicker than normal. Nothing to get excited about, but definitely more traffic than usual. Eager to put distance between herself and so many innocent people, Melanie shifted her belongings and decided to head back.

She crossed the street and headed back toward the visitors center. As she started, those annoying hairs at the back of her neck prickled. Someone else was staring at her, no doubt. Trying to figure out her story, what she wanted, where she lived. Those too interested in her always made her nervous. Melanie didn't want to appease anyone's curiosity, only to get back to the quiet of her new home.

When the feeling didn't pass, she paused and casually looked over her shoulder. She spotted many shoppers going about their own business, enjoying their Saturday afternoon. About the time she nearly gave the notion up to paranoia, she spotted him. There he was, leaning against the wall, smoking his cigarette and staring right at her. It was the man from her dream! The desert weather was warm, nearly 98 degrees, and she noticed he was carrying his trenchcoat instead of wearing it. But there was no doubt to Melanie that this was the same guy.

She didn't know why this man was in her dreams or why he seemed to be following

her, but she didn't want him to have an open invitation to her secluded part of the desert. She worried over the need to defend herself in such an isolated area. There would be no help if she needed it.

Deciding to confront the man seemed better than showing him the way to her cave, so she turned back the way she came. Before she could even cross the street, however, the man vanished. Melanie spent the better part of two hours wandering around the mall hoping to find him, but failed.

Sensing the day's light fading, she decided to head back. It would take her two hours to get there and she was already tired. Getting lost in the desert at night was not her idea of a good time, either.

* * *

On the walk home, she'd been compelled to glance behind her periodically but spotted no movement on her trek back into the desert mountains. After a couple of hours inside the cave without incident, her heartbeat finally resumed a normal beat, and she felt relaxed enough to sleep for the night. She avoided thinking about the man and the mall as she put away her supplies and prepared for bed. She worried that her fear might project itself in some way onto this man, and until she found out what his intentions were, she had no right altering the balance in his life. While she was not entirely certain what her abilities were or from where they came, her past taught her to be weary of thinking about any particular person for too long.

Her unease didn't entirely pass as she laid her head down for the night, but exhaustion got the better of her and she slipped into sleep quickly.

I know what you are….

Melanie looked around for the voice's owner, but the darkness of a cloudy desert night prohibited her from seeing his face.

Her instincts told her it was only a dream. A moment ago she'd lain down to sleep, but now she was standing outside her cave glancing into nothing.

Do you know what you are?

She spun around, unable to pinpoint a direction. The voice seemed to come from above her, from the sky itself.

"No, no I don't." She answered honestly, half hoping the mysterious man trying to speak to her could answer long buried questions.

Then why do you hide?

"I'm a danger to others."

Only those who displease you.

"Isn't that enough?"

You can be a blessing to others. Many have chosen that path.

"It's too risky. The good I do doesn't justify what I do in anger."

The man did not reply. Melanie stood silently for several minutes, wondering what to do next. The desert wind whipped the black curls around her ears, disturbing more than her hair. Time dragged on. Desperate, she yelled at the sky, tempting the voice to come back.

"I never asked for this!" Her scream echoed off the nearby rocks, repeating her cry for help.

Softly, she added, "I don't know what to do."

The wind whispered around her as it chilled her flesh.

I can relieve you of your burden.

* * *

Melanie woke up gasping. Fear crept in and took root. She tried to rationalize it. Nothing in the dream was particularly frightening. The voice had not threatened her. But she did not trust it. She wanted answers, but at the same time she was afraid to ask the questions.

The first rays of the morning stretched across her legs. She considering going down to the spring and taking a bath, but she wasn't quite ready to move yet.

What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she just be like everyone else? Melanie thought she'd let these questions go, but now they seemed to be rising to the surface once more. Excluding the brief encounter with the old man in the mall as a child, no one knew what she was capable of. She wished that old man would show up now. Maybe he knew how to stop it, or control it. Maybe he could explain her dreams and the man from town.

Only Steven knew her secret. He called it karma. At times her brother would call her lucky.

"You never know whether it's going to be good or bad, but there's always luck."

He had winked at her when he said it, as if they shared a private joke.

If it was a joke, it had a terrible punchline. Melanie's karmic powers cost Steven his life. Why had she been given such a horrible gift? And what was she to do with it? Hiding alone in the desert for the next sixty years or so did not sound promising.

She wasn't even twenty years old yet, not for a few months. Her life ended on the same day as Steven's because she'd discovered the threat she posed to other people. No little inconvenience of bad luck—she had caused his death.

And now someone was looking for her. Someone capable of entering her dreams. Maybe someone like her. Or maybe someone wanted to use her powers instead?

She couldn't allow anyone to manipulate her that way.

Her questions would go unanswered.

Frustrated, she lifted her cover from her legs and began gathering the items needed to take her bath. It was not until she nearly passed through the entrance to the back cavern that her peripheral vision halted her.

Melanie turned to her right to look toward the main entrance of the cave. There, many yards ahead of her, tucked into the closest shadow to the archway, was a mound. She'd already put away her supplies. Besides, she knew she wouldn't have left them so close to the opening of the cave.

Apprehensive, she edged forward. There were not many large animals in the Mojave Desert, but something may have sought shelter in her new home. Coyote howls kept her awake the first few nights in this new habitat. She felt ill prepared to take on a coyote, having made no weapons.

Idiot, she thought. *Now you are trapped in a cave with a wild animal and nothing but beads to ward him off!*

She scraped her feet along the ground, careful to keep her distance. The noise of her footsteps increased as Melanie tested to see if the creature would wake and move. She was in no hurry to rouse it, but she couldn't just sit back and wait for it to move.

Once she got closer to the body, she began to take notice of what kind of animal it was. It was a bird of some sort. There were clawed feet and dark feathers, with small white streaks. She approached from the back and could not see its head, but she saw enough of it to know it was

ugly.

Then she noticed the trail of blood leading from the bird to the wall of the cave.

Dead then. She almost sighed in relief. *Or dying,* she reminded herself.

She tilted her head slightly and followed the blood trail. Her instincts pleaded at her not to look, but her curiosity was strong. The blood trailed not only to the wall, but down it as well.

And there, written in what was left of the vulture at her feet, was a message.

I know what you are.

* * *

She gathered her things quickly. She did not have much. The walk back into town became slow and agonizing. The natural sounds of the desert were all eerie to her today. Every rock had a mystery behind it, something to be feared. Someone had invaded her home. He'd tried to frighten her, and she was woman enough to admit that it worked. No longer able to justify living alone in the middle of nowhere, she headed for the nearest shelter she could find, the Borrengo Springs Visitors Center.

The woman who managed the center had offered Melanie assistance before, allowing her to sell the jewelry she made. Ms. Valerne pleaded for Melanie to stay with her on occasion. She worried over Melanie's desire to be alone in such a vast and dangerous place.

Now Melanie needed to take the kind woman up on her offer. At least until she figured out what was going on and what she was going to do about it.

She tried to stay out of the way, and thought about the Valernes as little as possible. She hoped to avoid using her powers in any way. The couple exuded kindness and Melanie appreciated their help.

Her dilemma provided a variety of options, but none of them were safe. She could go back to the desert, or some other remote place, but not until something was done about her new stalker and her dreams. She could stay in Borrengo Springs, but what was the point of coming way out here just to put a different group of people in danger? She could also return to San Diego, back to where she started. That, however, put not only the city's residents at risk, but also her family and friends. She'd already caused one death and was in no rush to repeat history.

The dreams returned a couple of days later. Only now she saw horrible things. People being kidnapped, raped, and murdered. Flashes of tortured faces and brief montages of death tormented her. Melanie tried to force her mind to awaken, but nothing worked. It was like watching someone's home movies in fast forward, only the images were terrifying. All the while, she could hear the strange man's laughter and his voice telling her that this is what her powers were capable of. That this was what they could be used for. To let her anger be free and to use in vengeance. His voice was calm and soothing, the only sanctuary in her nightmare, and she listened to him to block out the images.

I can teach you to use your power.

She tried to close her eyes, but couldn't block the barrage of imagery.

You can take back control of your life.

It hurt, the fact that this stranger knew her so well. It pained her that her desire was so obvious.

I can show you the path. You can be free!

She sank to her knees and sobbed, wishing to hold her head in her hands as the faces screamed their terror at her.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" she screamed.

* * *

"I've just had the best luck since you came, Miss Melanie." Miss Valerne busied herself potting some plants for the backyard.

"You have?" Melanie tried to sound surprised, but knew she had inadvertently been the cause.

"Why, my thumb has never been so green. It's so difficult growing anything in this dry heat, but my poor little plants have been looking healthier since you showed up."

She laughed. "I really don't think I had much to do with that, Mrs. Valerne. I don't know a thing about plants."

The old woman reached across the kitchen counter and patted Melanie on the shoulder. "I never said you did. But I've never seen my plants looking so happy. It's a good sign."

Melanie just smiled and hoped Mrs. Valerne was right. She could use a little good luck.

"So, out of curiosity, you decided what you're gonna do now?" Mrs. Valerne slipped off her gardening gloves and strode towards the fridge.

"No, not yet. I'm still trying to figure some things out."

"Well, I worry about ya. Always moping around like you're carrying the world on your shoulders. And you being so young and all. You should move back to that big city, make some friends, and find a nice boy. Do things other girls your age do." She nodded sharply to punctuate her wisdom.

"I left all that behind. I don't know if I can face it again."

"Honey, I don't know what it is that's bothering you, but you just take your time. Decisions usually make themselves after awhile. Why don't you try to forget about it today? Tonight's the full moon, and George and I were gonna do some stargazing. You're welcome to join us." She patted Melanie's hand encouragingly.

Melanie had no intention of being near anyone during a full moon.

* * *

As soon as the sun set, Melanie excused herself to retire early. Mrs. Valerne looked disappointed, but she didn't question. Since Melanie had not been able to come up with a safe destination in time, she decided to go to sleep early enough that the effect of the moons would be diminished. The pressure of trying not to think during this time was more than Melanie wanted to deal with. And while she feared her dreams, she feared herself even more so.

In her sleep, she was flying. She spread her arms open wide and twirled through the wind. She felt free. Joy crept into a tiny corner of her soul, and she yelled with all her heart. It felt as if a huge weight lifted off of her, and she soared through the clouds.

Ecstatic, and at the same time weary of waking, Melanie cautiously surveyed her surroundings. The world she knew looked so different from up here. There were strange landscapes and varying climates. She approached a land of snow and ice and wondered at its beauty. Her pattern of flight altered, and she found herself coming closer to the snow.

She came toward the earth slowly, adjusting to the change easily. When she was low

enough to make out the people below her, she spotted an ice skating rink. She heard laughter as people chatted and enjoyed an evening outside. She watched in wonder as they glided over the ice. *It's almost like flying*, she thought.

No one noticed her as she hovered over the scene, enraptured by the peace it brought.

She felt a tug and her body began to pull back towards the sky. That's when she noticed the woman with the red hair. She was standing beside the pond, her scarf floating in the breeze. She looked directly at Melanie and smiled.

There are others.

Others? There were other people like her? The woman nodded and smiled. Melanie tried to fight the pull of her dream to drift back down to the frozen pond, but no amount of struggling changed her course.

She heard the woman's voice as the scene faded away.

We need you. Find us.

* * *

Melanie grasped her dream tightly when she woke up, willing it not to leave. She wanted to remember this one. The need to feel that level of freedom and peace, she craved it. Now that she'd experienced how wonderful she could truly feel, she was desperate not to let it go.

She remembered the lady in the blue snow jacket, her red hair dancing around her face. The woman's smile called out to her, and Melanie knew she had to find her.

A decision had made itself after all. No longer content to hide away, being regularly tormented by someone who knew more about her than she did, she now had a purpose.

She might not know how to control the powers given to her, but there was someone out there who did.

And there was also a man desperate to utilize Melanie's ignorance to his advantage. A man who inspired more fear in Melanie than her own ability to affect others. She knew he took great pleasure in using his karmic powers to intentionally torture other people. Innocent people who had no means to fight him. They would not even know which direction the attack came from. An accident here or a terrible tragedy there, he could work in secrecy with no evidence to tie him to the crime.

But Melanie knew just what he was capable of. And while she might not be able to stop him yet, she'd discovered there was someone out there who might have the answers Melanie needed.

She jumped out of bed and began to gather her simple belongings into a duffel bag. First stop, back home to San Diego to make things right with those she'd left behind.

And then north to her destiny.

Return to the Writing Challenge Contest index

Continued from Issue 40

Beneath the Shifting Sands (Part 2)

By Brendon Taylor

By the next morning, Marden's head throbbed from drink, worry and lack of sleep. It was a bad combination to bring into the desert. He had methods to deal with such discomforts, but even his best herbal tonics would take rest and time to work. He did not enjoy the luxury of either.

Cimetra's protectorate had come well armed for a battle, but not for a sand storm. The netting and cloth they brought would cake beyond usefulness once the winds filled them with sand. Likewise, their water skins, food rations and medical supplies were wrong for the desert storm they would encounter. Worst of all were the tents. Most of the poles would snap unless doubled or tripled and the oilcloth canvas was not treated or weighed down properly.

Using the most respectful tone he could muster, Marden listed his concerns to Cimetra over a late breakfast of sweet cakes and juice. Normally, Marden preferred to entertain his guests on the balcony or in the garden. Morning was usually the best time of day in Briver Downs, but the winds had already begun. Instead, they sat in his private study. He savored the last of his cake, wondering how long it would be before he enjoyed another.

His serving maid reached to take his empty plate, but he waved her hand away. "Maybe one more cake, Dinevra." She nodded and left.

Cimetra had hardly eaten any of her cake. "I suppose finding you was the right move, then, Marden. I've no doubt you could outfit my protectorate with the proper desert gear and remedy all these complaints."

Marden thought he heard something in Cimetra's voice that wasn't there the night before, perhaps fear or worry. "Of course I could normally obtain all that is needed, but we just don't have enough time. Had you come here a week or two earlier or even sent word..."

"But I didn't."

The storm would begin that night and with it would come the Gahdir. There were so many things he hated about being forced onto this journey. Oh, how his head ached.

Cimetra drank from her mug of spiced tea. "I ask a great deal from you, Marden, but I do so out of necessity. I won't waste time to tell you of the impossible demands made upon me in this journey."

"I can manage to get most of the supplies. We can double the poles and canvas from your tents and have the material oiled. Your soldiers will be cramped, but four doubled tents should hold most of the men, and we can buy another two tents – we'll need extra pegs and lashings. But everything will cost two or three times its value with the storm nigh." He looked expectantly at her.

"I suppose I chose well by coming to the richest man in the valley for assistance," she said.

"Should I send the bill to Duke Shiangrel?" Marden smiled, knowing his hope was a fool's.

"Send it if you wish, but if it gets paid, I'll eat a bull, horns and all." Her smile easily outshone Marden's.

Marden really did not care for that expression, but maybe it was just the pain in his head. When Dinevra came with another sweet cake, he decided his stomach was full enough.

Cimetra said, "I appreciate your help with the supplies, but I came to you for what you

know, not what you could provide. We should talk about the Gahdir."

Marden leaned back. "Yes. Of course. You've seen the stone Gahdir already. The size and proportions are accurate. What would you like to know?"

"Really, all I need to know is how to kill them. But, I would also like to know the way they operate, their intelligence and any risks they will pose for my men."

Marden shook his head. "I'm not going to be much help, I'm afraid." His hands shook a little, so he pulled them off the table. "Are you certain you must destroy them? You know virtually nothing about them."

Her smile faded. "If you're sympathetic to the Gahdir, I may question my wisdom in coming to you, Marden. My orders and assignment are unequivocal."

Marden nodded. "My sympathies are reserved for those of us walking into the storm, Captain." He leaned forward and stood. "I better use the morning to secure our equipment and provisions. We can talk more on the way. What time do we leave?"

"When can you be ready?"

"Shortly after mid-day."

She rose from her seat and turned crisply to leave. "That's when we'll leave, then."

As he watched her go, he thought of the heavy price in lives the mission would cost. It was unlikely any of the soldiers, including Cimetra, would survive the next two days.

* * *

By early afternoon, the protectorate, sixty men led by one woman, marched single-file into the Coable desert with their pack camels trailing behind. The blowing sand and dust kept their heads bent and veils lowered as they crossed the red rocks. If the wind strengthened, the veils would be useless and they would have to wrap their heads and hope the glass shields would work. Marden walked near the front of the line, close behind Cimetra.

He had to yell to be heard. "Once we cross this span, we'll be to the first arches. You could slow down and we'd still have plenty of time to make camp before dusk."

"I want to get to the far side of the arches and near the first dunes well before sunset. We'll need extra time to make camp in this wind." She did not look back.

Marden hurried to get closer so he would not have to yell as loud. "Listen. I know we did not have a chance to talk about the Gahdir much before."

"You made your reluctance toward my mission clear," she said. "I still need information, but I don't have time to determine your motives. Are you going to help me?"

Marden knew he needed to choose his words carefully. "With the little we were able to discuss this morning, I'm sure I gave an inaccurate impression of my motives. Trust me, I am willing to help all I can."

"Trust is only freely given by fools, Marden. And I'm no fool. Your sympathy toward the Gahdir was made clear. Start with that – explain why you care about them." She glanced back, but the veil concealed her expression.

Marden nodded. "My feelings toward the Gahdir are not nearly as deep as you might think." The wind gusted, nearly blowing his veil away, but he caught it and secured the ties under his chin. "However, I believe the Gahdir are not the source of death that the storms bring—there is something else out in the dunes."

"You're straying from the topic," she said.

"My apologies. I got caught in the storms the last time the twin moons aligned. I

encountered the Gahdir in the desert. You were right about me having seen one up close before."

"Go on."

"I was caught in the storm unprepared. I thought to sketch the rocks with the sand blowing through and then paint the image while waiting out the storm in town." He struggled to catch his breath. "At the edge of the sand, where the red rock emerges from the dunes, I saw them. At least a half dozen Gahdir. They were communicating with each other – talking for lack of a better word. Any creature that intelligent cannot possibly be a mindless killing machine."

Cimetra walked next to Marden and her layers of thin robes whipped at his body. "I've never considered them to be *mindless* killing machines. That they're intelligent only makes them more dangerous."

"That might be possible, but I saw them talk to each other – behave civilly with each other. Also, they saw me and were close enough to attack. They didn't. They let me pass on my way to Briver Downs. If they wanted to kill me, I've no doubt they could have done so."

"Often, a man may walk past a bear or lion without being attacked," she said.

"But, lions and bears are not highly intelligent creatures."

"Just as likely, the Gahdir were on their way to stir up the plagues in the desert and didn't want to waste time hunting one man."

"Yes, but I was heading back to town and could have warned the people about the Gahdir," he said.

"You might have appeared too weak to survive the storm. Besides, they hardly seemed to be worried about secrecy. I've seen the size of them, their long hooked claws and maws to make wolves' jaws look like pups'."

The wind tore at their robes and veils, but neither huddled nor bent. Marden knew she would find an answer for everything he suggested. He also knew what he was about to say was folly. "Is there any way you could observe them and determine for yourself whether they are a danger before you start killing them?"

Cimetra's voice cracked. "I can't afford to wager with my soldiers' lives. You said you weren't sympathetic to them, but that's clearly not true." She drew a long-bladed dagger and held it to Marden's chest. "You're in my custody until this mission is over. If you do anything to put my soldiers in danger, they will have leave to take whatever action they deem necessary."

Marden held up his hands. "I won't betray you or your men, Captain, but please consider setting up camp near the center of the arches. The conditions won't be as harsh there."

She shook her head. "Marden, I cannot trust your counsel when I question your motives. We will camp at the desert's edge."

"We will not survive the night. Death comes from beneath the sands. If we are not well clear of it..."

"I will organize our defenses myself." Her tone left no doubt that her mind was settled.

* * *

By the time the protectorate had crossed the red rock and reached the desert, the dunes were hardly visible because of all the blowing sand. Marden shivered and pulled his extra robe from the pack camel. Jorag Riben shadowed Marden, having been assigned to be his guardian by Captain Cimetra. Jorag was a tree of a man, tall with long arms and a strong grip, which Marden had learned when he didn't move quickly enough to suit Jorag.

Marden was almost amused by the sight of the soldiers scrambling to pitch tents in the

harsh conditions. Had the stakes not been so high, he could have enjoyed the scene. Instead, he watched the sands when he could spare a moment from helping set up camp. Being held in custody did not relieve him of responsibility within camp. If Cimetra would listen, he could tell her that just before dark there should be a calm that would precede the fiercest winds. They could make camp then and still be settled in before nightfall. But, Cimetra would not accept that sort of counsel. Just as well, he thought. He would need the hour of calm to do what he planned.

Cimetra moved throughout the camp directing the placement of tents and weapon posts. Soldiers hammered in stakes to secure the swivel bases for huge cross-bows and racks of pikes and long spears. Groups of five men manned each post. The tents were placed in the center of the camp and the camels kept within the ring of tents.

Once the tents were almost all up, soldiers began delivering provisions from the packs to each tent. Cimetra approached Marden and Jorag. She faced Jorag and said, "You're in my post, Jorag, but Marden remains your primary responsibility."

Jorag's stern expression did not change. "Yes, Captain."

Cimetra turned to leave, but Marden caught her sleeve. "Treat me how you want, but you're making a mistake to ignore my advice."

She spun and whipped her veil away from her face. "I made my mistake in coming to you in the first place. I'm done making mistakes by you. Know this – if you obstruct my mission in any way, the repercussions will continue when we return to Briver Downs. If you survive that long." Her cheeks were red and her blue eyes intense. Marden chastised himself for even noticing the color of her stubborn eyes. When she was done staring him down, she gave Jorag additional authority to reprimand Marden for any suspect behavior.

While Jorag listened to Cimetra, Marden slipped a hand into his extra robe and was happy to find his brace of knives. Moments later, a guide line securing the windward corner of a tent near Marden mysteriously failed and the tent began to blow away. Soldiers rushed to catch the tent and save the supplies that had been stored within. Among them was Jorag. When he turned to find his captive, Marden was gone.

"After him, Jorag!" Cimetra ordered. "Quint, go with Jorag – bring Marden back." Sand swirled on the strong winds.

The men ran back toward the red rock arches and were quickly gone from sight. Cimetra worked with the men to secure the loose tent and fix the cut lines. By the time camp was finally settled, the winds began to die down. Cimetra laughed and said to nobody in particular, "Now, that was a good joke." Cimetra was not a religious person, but if there was a god watching over the desert, he must hold a healthy appreciation for irony.

"Captain!" Chiap called from across camp. "There's something moving in the desert!"

* * *

Until the wind finally relented, Marden thought he might not be able to find the right arch. Then, the winds died almost at once. Marden stopped to catch his breath and cough out sand. With dusk about to give way to evening, the twin moons filled the sky above. Overhead, networks of arches formed a pattern that he recognized; the relatively small arch he sought was not far away.

As he was about to leave, he glanced over his shoulder. What he saw wrenched his stomach. Jorag and two other soldiers ran over the red rock toward him. He had a small lead on them, but their pace was much faster than he could manage. With a last cough, he ran toward

the small arch.

Twice, Marden stumbled on the uneven rock, but was able to stay on his feet. His lungs burned and his breath came in rasping, sputtering gulps. Voices called out to him behind, ordering that he stop. The exhilaration of the sprint and fear that he would feel a spear between his shoulders at any time quickened his feet.

Marden was about a hundred paces from the arch when they overtook him. Disappointment flooded him, but at the same time he was relieved they hadn't killed him. Jorag's strong hands grasped his shoulders and pushed him to the ground. Pain burst through his face and blood poured from his smashed nose.

"If we had shackles, you'd be chained..." Jorag's deep voice trailed off.

Marden looked up and saw a huge Gahdir step through the arch as though appearing from the air itself. Marden saw that the moons had aligned. Then, more Gahdir came through. Soon, twenty behemoths marched toward them with green scaly hides glistening in the failing daylight.

Marden saw Jorag grip his spear to throw it. "No!" Marden yelled.

* * *

Cimetra ran to Chiap and looked out into the desert.

"What did you see?" she asked.

"It was right there." He pointed. "A mound of sand shifted."

Cimetra watched the desert a while longer, but nothing moved.

"Over here, Captain!" Another soldier called out on the far side of camp.

"You better not be playing games, men." Cimetra ran back to the side of camp she had just left.

"No, Captain, look," Wesden, a young, red haired soldier said.

This time, she saw the mound of sand moving. The mound vibrated intermittently for a wile, then stopped. Soon, other mounds of sand moved. "Soldiers, to your posts!"

The sand mound Wesden had pointed out vibrated again. Sand sputtered into the air in small puffs and something emerged. A long-bodied creature the size of a weasel, with countless legs on its underbelly, rolled down the dune and righted itself. At once, it glided over the sand toward the arches and in the direction of camp. Then, more of the caterpillar-like creatures burst from the sand. They all moved toward the Bloodlands.

"Cut them down!" Cimetra said.

The soldiers pulled out swords and spears and maneuvered into the desert in packs. Cimetra noticed the smell even before the first creature was cut in two by Chiap. The air smelled rancid. After the first creature was split, the odor was almost overpowering. When more were cut down, the soldiers could hardly bear the stench. Still, the conflict seemed easily managed at first.

Then, Wesden pointed out that one of the severed bodies was moving again. It seemed to have sealed its own wound and was now attacking him. He swung his sword at the little beast, but it bounded forward, ahead of the blade. Wesden screamed out as it attached itself to his leg. Another soldier split the beast again, but the part attached to Wesden's leg held fast and bored into his flesh. He fell to the ground, writhing and pulling at the creature.

More creatures came toward the soldiers.

"Chiap, help Wesden! Everyone pull back to camp!" Cimetra ordered.

By the time they got back to camp, two of the camels were down and their bodies seemed to ripple with the creatures boring into their flesh. One soldier vomited. Cimetra gave specific orders, and they formed tight ranks to ward off the creatures. They learned the creatures could be killed if inflicted with enough trauma, but the brownish blood stunk horribly. Several soldiers were dispatched to eliminate the creatures attacking the camels. Chiap was one of them.

He called out to Cimetra, "Captain! They disappear into the sand after they've fed on flesh!"

"Watch the sand and if they come back, kill them," she said.

The soldiers fought off the creatures until their arms ached from swinging weapons. They tried taking turns, but found that they needed nearly all of their number to fend off the creatures. Time quickly became their enemy. More soldiers sickened as the odor became oppressive.

Then, the wind began to blow again, and it became hard to see the creatures and fight them off. Soldiers started falling more frequently and a growing sense of doom pervaded the camp.

"Captain, over here."

Cimetra turned and slipped out of ranks to attend her soldier. "What is it?"

Jarrin pointed to the horizon. As he did, two of the small creatures bored into his legs, bringing him to his knees at once. She dropped and carved the little beasts out before they could penetrate deeply. She looked up and saw huge forms charging through the blowing sand. *So this is the death the desert promised*, she thought.

Dozens of Gahdir charged toward them, bounding over rock and across the sand. Two of them carried things over their shoulders that looked like bags of flour.

Cimetra noticed the things on their shoulders were men. Her men. "Daric, Kluft and Habel, man the crossbows – fire on the Gahdir!"

The soldiers, to their credit, did as they were ordered, but only Habel made it to the crossbow. The others were brought down by the small creatures. Before Habel could fire, however, the Gahdir were upon them.

Before the Gahdir reached the men, several of them dug into large belt sacks and drew out handfuls of tiny crystals. Even the tiny creatures that had attacked the soldiers without fear fled before them. The Gahdir moved with the grace of a dance around the camp. Some spread the crystals over the sand and others ripped through the little creatures with their long claws. Those creatures that the crystals hit shrieked and shriveled almost at once.

Cimetra just stood and watched. Only a couple of the soldiers had tried to engage the Gahdir, but the Gahdir avoided the blades and moved about their business of attacking the creatures. When the camp was secured, Cimetra noticed that the men returned by the Gahdir were unharmed.

Marden finally approached camp, having trailed after the Gahdir.

Now, most of the Gahdir continued to pursue the creatures across the desert, but one enormous Gahdir remained behind. It approached Cimetra and Marden. "The crystals will ward the Dihalisks from your camp, but they will also harm you if you touch them. Proceed with caution when you leave in the morning."

Cimetra seemed too stunned to speak, so Marden offered his sincere thanks.

The Gahdir almost seemed to smile, but its face was so un-human that Cimetra could not tell.

Cimetra finally found her voice, "Dihalisks? How do you know of these creatures, and how

is it you know our language?"

The Gahdir laughed, or at least made a sound Cimetra hoped was a laugh. "I don't speak your language, but you speak ours. Dihalisk is from an older language meaning 'the devil's curse' and we've known of their kind for centuries." He reached into his belt pouch and withdrew a large flask. "Make sure all of your soldiers drink this water or the disease of the Dihalisk will claim your lives yet."

Cimetra started to cry. "Are you gods?"

The laugh was even louder. "No, but we come to do their bidding. The Evil One exerted too much influence by sending the Dihalisks to this desert. That violation allowed the gods the freedom to send us to protect their children."

Her tears ran freely. "I owe you an apology."

"It is not you, but he who sent you that owes the apology. Marden explained your mission. I warn you, however, use caution in reporting to your duke. The Evil One holds sway in that heart."

As the wind came up again, the Gahdir slipped away into the desert.

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Continued from Issue 40

Long Arm of the Law (Part 2)

By Steven Richards

Reality folded in upon itself alarmingly, eventually forming a shape that, were it interested in such things, would have been on very friendly terms with a hypercube. Rancher stepped back into the higher dimensions and cringed as the sensation worsened. Two more levels and he was able to open his eyes again. The dizziness slowly faded, but for the first time since his first encounter with the humans, Rancher felt on the verge of panic.

They had never attacked him before. He regarded them with a certain fondness—particularly this very talented runner. It had made him careless. Now the human—moving at speeds no other of his species could match—was very close to the third marker, at the outermost border of Rancher's property.

Find him. Stop him.

Rancher went higher still, into the shadow realms.

Michael could see the desert. Long had the Enclave sought to reach and cross this sandy wasteland; ever had it eluded them. One more mile. Two more minutes. He shot off another transmission: *third marker*. He could imagine the cheers back home; there'd be a party tonight, even if the Warden caught him.

The pings had stopped. He was beginning to prefer the old days, when the Warden was *always* undetectable. It was less nerve-wracking to constantly expect something rather than wonder about it. He put on a burst of speed, obeying a combination of gut instinct and the data generated by the scanning implant in his brain.

Sooner than anticipated, he was blindsided by what felt like a slow-moving and entirely invisible freight train. He lost his footing and fell, sliding across loose rock and rough dirt. His vision swam, and then he blacked out.

No more than a second could have passed before he regained consciousness, for now he tumbled head over heels into open air. His stomach tried to jump up his throat as he realized what he was looking at: the face of the Desert Wall, the cliff at the northernmost end of the canyons. Three thousand feet straight down.

More like two thousand feet, now.

He was still too dizzy to see straight, but his arms and legs moved freely, obeying the instinctive command hammered into muscle memory by a thousand practice sessions in the simulator. His hands unclasped a pair of cloth flaps on his sleeves and re-attached them near his waist. He tried to ignore the way the horizon, the ground and the sky kept trading places.

One thousand feet. The altimeter on his belt squealed.

Michael spread his arms, stretching the fabric taut, and his fall slowed abruptly, as if he had struck and passed through a brick wall. Gritting his teeth, he angled closer to the cliff face. This was a tricky maneuver under ideal circumstances, and right now his depth perception was cutting in and out. The sensors told him the cliff was fifty feet away. He blacked out again. When he opened his eyes the cliff was no more than fifteen feet away, on a homicidal collision course with his face. He jerked his body upright with three feet to spare and tensed his arms and legs

for impact.

After a third blackout, he found himself clinging to the rock with one hand. Blood ran down his face from a contusion on his temple. For a moment, reality flip-flopped and the cliff wall became the floor. It was as reassuring as it was disturbing. He closed his eyes again and waited for the dizziness to clear. Whatever the Warden hit him with—and wherever he hit *from*—it was a doozy.

Rancher stood at the top of the cliff and looked down at the human. Such strange creatures, that they willingly risked their lives and fragile bodies in this endless quest to relocate themselves from one patch of ground to another. It defied logic, as well as common sense.

But then, he doubted they saw the world the same way he did.

The second ring of border sensors on the other side of the ranch were beginning to complain; the decoys had made it through the first ring and were now looking for a way through the second.

Back to work.

Michael opened his eyes and found what must have been a thousand faces gathered around and above him. Someone was saying his name; everyone was asking questions. He rolled on his side and vomited. They all looked so hopeful, so worried, so *excited*. Michael felt tired and sore and angry.

Arms helped him up, half-carried him back into the Enclave. The medics looked him over while the crowd watched from the hallway. After a few minutes of prodding they pronounced him in good health, though slightly dehydrated. The cuts and bruises were all quite superficial, they assured him. His body would take care of those on its own in due course. Someone brought him water.

Later, after Security dispersed the crowd and the medics moved on to check the incoming decoy runners, a familiar baritone interrupted his rest.

"Michael."

Michael sat up on the bed, wide awake instantly. "Councilor." It was not yet time for his debriefing, and the DT usually conducted those internally before sending a report to the Council. "What can I do for you?" The Council did not have a formal leader, but if it had, this man—nameless as the rest—would have been it.

"I have a question for you, Michael." The Councilor smiled faintly, a brief, upward tug at the wrinkled corners of his mouth as his gray eyes focused on some amusing thought within his own mind.

"I will do my best to answer it, Councilor," Michael responded, adding a deferential nod.

"Today's run seemed…different. You know the Warden better than any human alive; what will he do?"

Michael chose his words carefully. "We frightened him today."

"Frightened?" the Councilor asked, startled. "How?"

"The disruptor. The third marker. My new abilities. I'm growing stronger and faster; *humans* are growing stronger and faster, and the Warden is only getting older." Michael hesitated. "He'll have to take more permanent action soon."

"What type of action?"

"A replacement. There are others like him—towns, cities, perhaps an entire civilization. Inconceivable as it seems that no one else witnessed Impact, the Council itself has long believed our presence here to be a secret kept by the Warden. That may change."

"You think he'll tell the others?"

"He must," said Michael. "He fears our species and what will happen if we encounter his. Inevitably, he'll have to give over his role as lawman to whatever authorities exist on this planet."

"And what will *we* do?" the Councilor asked, a little sourly. Michael's assessment did not leave him feeling very optimistic.

Michael frowned thoughtfully. *He who hesitates is lost.*

"Well, I've got this idea…"

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